Dark Frontier Blues 4

Takeo Ichikawa

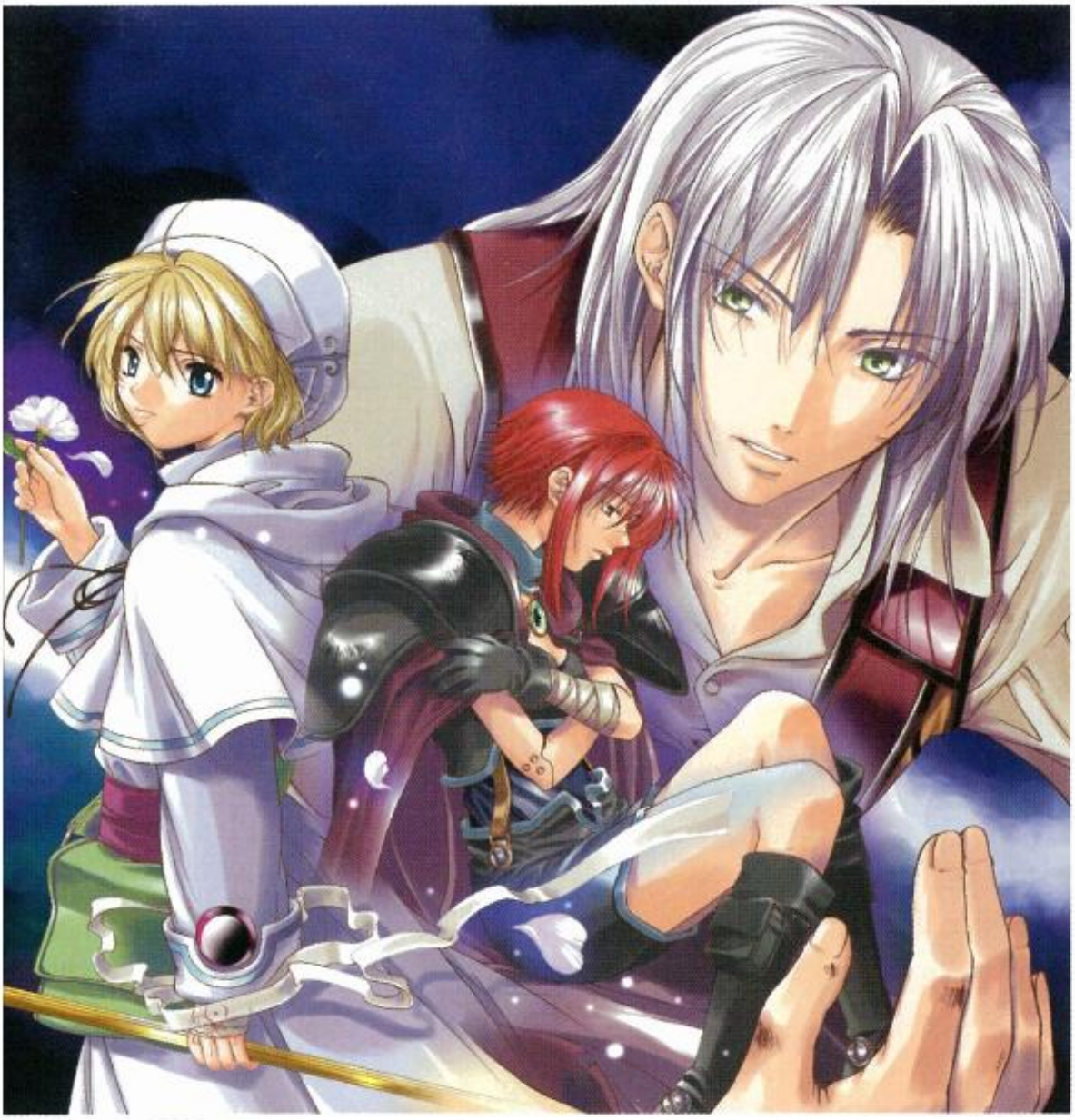

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Table of Contents

【Prologue】
【Chapter 1: Wilder Village / Holy War General】
【Chapter 2: Wilder Village / Doubt】
【Chapter 3: Wilder Village / Parting】
【Chapter 4: Temple of Guidance / Truth】
【Chapter 5: Temple of Guidance / Inferno】
【Epilogue】
Afterword by Takeo Ichikawa

【Prologue】

The sheer cliff face, with its near-vertical slope, overwhelmed all who beheld it.

The rock surface, long exposed to acid rain, had discolored to a reddish-black hue, and its height easily exceeded two hundred meters. The precipice, resembling a thick wall, was said to stretch ten kilometers from east to west.

The North Wall of Ruaisato - that was the name of the sheer cliff stretched out across the center of the New Continent. This natural wonder, which divides the Atlas and Guiana regions, is yet another distortion caused by the "Ancient Catastrophe." Ever since its emergence, the cliff has , its majestic form lying dormant in this land.

"But still!" Riot snapped in a rough voice. "Someone could've at least carved out a single climbing route! What is this? It's not like it's some truly untouched, unclimbed cliff or anything!" Despite her grumbling, she drove her piton forcefully into the rock face. With practiced ease, she threaded the climbing rope through the piton, and the red-haired girl took another step up the North Face of Ruaisato. Her eyes, fixed on the sheer cliff, burned with a fiery red intensity, her indomitable will laid bare.

Even for Riot, who had traversed countless battlefields as a mercenary, this was the first time she had grappled with such brutal terrain. To keep it from being blown away by the gusts, she had folded her trusty coat and bundled it together with her luggage - but even that luggage was embarrassingly bulky. Aside from the backpack stuffed with food and fuel, she was even carrying a massive electromagnetic greatsword. While its power as a melee weapon was immense, its weight and length were nothing short of a hindrance.

However, Riot's irritation wasn't due to the luggage - it was because of her slow-moving partner — and said partner's share of the load she was carrying on her back.

"Hurry up and climb up here, Justice! It's getting dark!" She shouted down toward the distant valley below. "You're light on your feet, aren't you? You're not carrying any luggage, so just get moving already!"

"W-well, that's easier said than done..." Trembling, only his voice echoed up the sheer cliff face. Far below the climbing rope, a small boy dressed in white was clinging to the rock face. "If you rush and slip, it'll be dangerous, won't it? Let's go a little slower." The boy, with his lustrous golden hair flowing in the breeze - Justice, was desperately gripping the climbing rope with both hands, steadily climbing the cliff step by step. But his pace was far too slow. Though he wore an angelic, innocent smile, the sound of his teeth chattering could be heard clearly.

"If I keep going at your pace, it'll take five years to get to the top! Pull yourself together!"

"But Riot, you're strong, so it's fine for you, but for me..."

"You idiot! Stop looking up so much! You're staring at my ass, aren't you?!"

"I-I'm not doing that! Don't say such weird things!"

"Anyway, if you don't hurry up, I'm going to dump your stuff right here!" Saying that, Riot shook the pack on her back dramatically. "Look, there's your precious super-rich chocolate mousse and brandy-soaked fruit cake. And I bet there's an apple pie drizzled with honey in there too, right~?"

"Stop it, stop it, Riot! Please, don't drop that, no matter what!"

"So, sweets are more important to you than me?" Riot looked down at her partner in exasperation.

Tied to her back, alongside the electromagnetic greatsword, was the Justice's stafg. Equipped with the rare gem Metalite, it was proof of Justice's status and abilities - but for the sake of his most precious dessert, Justice suddenly sped up.

"Don't you dare throw it away! And don't crush the side pocket either!"

"Yeah, yeah, I know there's a chiffon cake loaded with whipped cream in there. Ugh, just saying the name makes my mouth go all sugary." Feeling a bit sick to her stomach, Riot continued her climb.

A vast wilderness stretched out below them. Leaving Justice behind, Riot eventually reached the top of the cliff. "Alright, this is it... we've made it..."

The moment she leaped over the rocky outcrop, Riot instinctively looked down. "W-what the...!?" A blinding light blocked her vision. Riot stiffened at the intense light pouring down from the sky.

(Surely, this light isn't...) Filled with both anticipation and awe, she looked up at the sky. There, as always, the sea of clouds unique to the New Continent stretched out endlessly - but clearly, the cloud layer was thin. There were no traces of those garish colors. Gaps had opened in the drifting clouds, and a majestic band of light was pouring down onto the ground.

"The sun... is it...?" Riot stood there, momentarily dumbfounded by the light she was bathing in for the first time in her life.

Since the "Ancient Catastrophe," the skies of the New Continent had been shrouded in thick clouds. Sunlight was supposed to be a blessing of nature that had perished long ago. And yet, right now, it was gently bathing Riot's body.

(I'd heard there were a few places where the sun still shone... So this is one of them...)

She took a deep breath. The air felt much purer than in other lands. Then, when she looked down at the ground before her, Riot was once again left speechless.

"Whew... we're here, Riot... Whoa, what is that?!" Justice, who had finally made it to the top of the cliff, was momentarily blinded by the intense glare.

Coming to her senses, Riot gave her partner a firm tug on the arm. "Pull yourself together. Looks like this is the edge of the Eternal Plains." Smiling, Riot pointed at the expanse of green.

Naturally, Justice was speechless for a moment. "It's like I'm in a dream... the sun... and to think there's so much vegetation growing here..."

"I wonder if it's because of the air currents. The sea of clouds is thinner only here. "If we cross that hill, we should reach the Bazara inn, so let's hang in there a little longer." Riot pointed toward their destination for the night.

But those words didn't register with Justice. Enchanted by the plain's beauty, he gazed at it in awe and ran his fingers through the grass at his feet. The boy cherished the life breathing within the earth. "It's amazing, isn't it, the power of the sun... I've never seen grass this lush before."

"Me neither. I had no idea there was a place like this on the New Continent."

"Oh, Riot, look!" As soon as he said it, Justice dashed toward a nearby rocky outcrop. "Look, there are flowers blooming! It's amazing — so many!"

From the crack in the rock the boy pointed to, several large white lilies were in full bloom. They were large, pure white flowers, basking fully in the sunlight.

(They really are beautiful...) Riot honestly thought so too. But at the same time, a distant memory began to fade into her mind.

Someone was calling her name. In a gentle voice. Accompanied by a floral fragrance. Riot let out a cheer and threw herself into his arms. The memory of burying her face in his soft skin and acting as spoiled as she could. When was that, exactly...

"Here, Riot, I want to give this to you." Suddenly, Justice's voice snapped her out of her daydream. The boy was holding out a beautiful flower.

"Huh? What's this, all of a sudden..."

"I said I'm giving it to you. Oh, and just so you know, I didn't pick it. I felt bad for it. I just picked it up after it fell. That's okay, right?" Justice had regained his usual beaming smile.

That smile was so dazzling that Riot instinctively turned her face away. "You're such an idiot. What am I supposed to do with something like that?"

"Hmm, how about wearing it in your hair? I think it'd look good on you."

"Are you kidding? On me? You should pick gifts based on who you're giving them to."

But as Riot snorted derisively, Justice tilted his head in confusion. "That's strange. Girlz are supposed to be happy when they get flowers."

"Where did you pick up such outdated knowledge? Even if you're right, you're a decade too early."

"I used to give flowers to my mom, back in the day..." Saying this, Justice lowered his gaze slightly.

Without saying another word, he clutched a single flower.

Riot fell silent too, looking down at his young partner for a moment.

(Mom, huh...)

Those words overlapped with a distant memory in Riot's mind. A faint presence whose face she didn't even know. All she remembered was that warmth.

"Fine, I'll take it!" Riot said with an air of exasperation, snatching the flower from Justice's hand. "But next time, find a prettier flower. This one's way too plain for me to put it anywhere. Got it?"

"Yeah, I'll find you a prettier flower!" Justice pulled his pillow from under Riot's back and ran happily out onto the plain. "Come on, Riot! It's really beautiful out here!"

"I can tell just by looking. It's like your earlier dejection was all a lie."

"You know... I kind of wish we could live here forever!" Justice said casually.

But those words caused a faint tremor to run through Riot's limbs.

(If only I could live here forever...? Live here forever... with someone...) Lost in thought, Riot laughed bitterly. There was no way such a time would ever come. Although she was born human, Riot's body was filled with artificial muscles and organs. She was a war-hardened, Battle Armor Demon with weapons embedded even in the tips of his fingers and toes. Nowhere in her life had she ever found a happy existence. She had even given up looking for one.

(It's too late now...) Smiling once more, Riot followed after Justice.

The Bazara post town was situated along the highway that cut through the Eternal Plains. In this region bordering the Atlas and Guiana territories, no city-states had yet been established - instead, countless frontier villages dotted the landscape. The Bazara post town was supposed to be one of the hubs of the regional network connecting those villages.

"Wait, Justice." When they reached the entrance to the post town, Riot quietly warned him.

The sun was already beginning to sink below the horizon, and twilight was falling all around them. Against the orange sky, the inn town — comprising a dozen or so houses — cast a dark silhouette. Yet despite the hour, not a single light was lit in the town. There was no sign of preparations for supper, nor any bustle of people returning from a day's work.

"My nose's been picking up on it for a while now, ugh."

"Yeah, I noticed it too." As he spoke, Justice gripped his staff tightly in both hands and shifted his stance, shuffling his feet.

Though still a boy, Justice was tasked with fighting the evil that lurked in this world. He, too, had already detected the scent of blood filling the air.

Even for the mercenary Riot, the stench of death was nothing new. It wasn't a pleasant smell, though. "If anything happens, call out right away, got it?" Giving her usual instructions, Riot stepped out onto the street running through the inn town. Silently drawing the electromagnetic greatsword from her back, she scanned the area left and right.

"All artificial muscles, limiter disengaged. Ley-line scanner activated, connected to auto-aim function" The text scrolled rapidly across Riot's retinas. The Battle Armor Demon, having shifted all combat functions to standby mode, advanced slowly through the twilight-shrouded inn town of Bazara. There was no sign of life in the shops lining the street, and the weathered signs creaked as they swayed in the wind.

(Which way...?) Following the increasingly strong scent of blood, Riot kept her eyes scanning the area. Then, from behind him...

"Guh...!" Justice's throat involuntarily let out a scream.

Noticing his shock, Riot quickly turned back to the boy. "What's wrong, Jus...!" Riot noticed what Justice was looking at and, in silence, backed away from the spot. Before their eyes, the intersection located in the center of the post town had come into view.

A sudden gust of wind swept through the street, forcing a pungent stench into Riot's nostrils - but the smell was the least of his concerns. In the center of the intersection, several eerie objects stood towering. They were a cluster of massive spears driven deep into the ground. Human heads were densely stacked upon these spears, arranged at regular intervals. Men, women, the elderly, children... all had the spearheads driven through the tops of their heads and piercing through to just

below their chins. Dripping fresh blood painted dark, murky pools across the ground. The stench of death emanated from those objects.

"...What the..." Riot could utter nothing else. Even for her, who had witnessed countless hellish scenes of chaos and screams, this was the first time she had ever seen such a brutal massacre. There were twelve spears. Roughly a hundred heads were on display. It was clear they were people from the inn town.

"Musr be the work of a Blood Sworn... I can't think of anything else. But....."

The scene from just a few hours ago flashed back into Riot's mind. The warmth of the sun's rays. The vast green plains. The large white flower tucked into her chest.

"So this is the New Continent, too..." She exhaled deeply, holding back her overwhelming emotions.

But Justice showed no reaction to her words at all. He simply stared intently at the objects of slaughter. Then, suddenly, he began to walk.

"Justice?" Ignoring Riot's call, the boy approached a single spear.

The necks of the victims, twisted in agony, lay in a row, covered in blood.

Staring at them up close, Justice's throat convulsed. "It's the same..."

"The same as what?"

"Twelve spears... severed heads on display..."

When he said that, Riot finally realized it too. At the same moment, a cold shiver ran down his spine.

"You're kidding, Justice..."

"It's the same... as when my father disappeared..." With fear etched on his face, Justice's voice trembled with confusion. "Just like... two years ago..."

Seeing Justice's profile as he muttered those words, Riot's hair stood on end.

The memory that had resurfaced in Justice was surely the very beginning of the entire story.

No matter how abhorrent it might be...

Back then, Justice had been struggling in the darkness. Stripped of all his clothes, he had been swimming endlessly within a rigid, confining space.

(Please tell me, I beg you... What did I do... For what crime am I being summoned here... Please tell me, Your Rainbow-Colored Holiness...) He questioned the Supreme Being for hours on end.

No, perhaps it was days. Or maybe even weeks - but Justice was left abandoned in the suffocating darkness, receiving no answer.

"They've found you, Justice." And the voice that finally called out to his dazed consciousness was bitterly cold.

(Who... is it...?)

"It is your father, Eisen's subordinates." The voice belonged to a woman, but it was clear she was harboring a sullen anger.

Even so, Justice couldn't help but let out a sigh of relief.

(Thank goodness... I was worried...)

"I figured as much."

(Who did they find found?.. Lord Zock, Sister Limia... Mr. Ural...)

"All of them. All twelve of them."

(Really? All of them.....!) In that moment of joy, Justice forgot all the hardships he had endured. He remembered the tears of joy streaming down his cheeks as if it were yesterday.

(Everyone is safe, aren't they? Oh, God of Creation...) But Justice hadn't noticed he countless gazes fixed upon him.

The gazes of the Popes, filled with suspicion and fury.

(So where is Father? Don't any of you know where Father is? Where he disappeared to?)

In response to Justice's questions, a female Pope's voice replied coldly. "Why don't you ask them yourselves?"

And then, the darkness lifted. Suddenly, his vision cleared, and a vast world spread out before Justice.

He wished he hadn't seen it.

It was the beginning of a story more merciless than the darkness itself.

(Sister Limia...) In a hollow voice, Justice called out to the head at his feet. A blood-soaked head, pierced by a long spear.

But it was undoubtedly that of the female paladin he had looked up to like a sister.

"This is the city-state of Bizerta. Recovering the remains of Paladin Limia. No surviving residents."

"This is the city-state of Lalanne. Recovering the remains of Paladin Olaf. No surviving residents found."

"This is the city-state of Narola. Recovering the remains of Paladin Ural. Searching for survivors."

As a voice spoke, the image before his eyes shifted - but all that was shown were familiar heads left behind in the ruins.

(Everyone... everyone, why...?)

"I too wish to know the answer." The Pope's voice asked Justice, who was sobbing. "Why did they die in the distant land of Antarctica? Why did they go to the distant land of Antarctica? Why did your father take them to Antarctica? What did your father do to the 1.2 million people of the Twelve Cities? Answer me, Justice...!" The voice of interrogation echoed within Justice's mind.

He instinctively covered his ears and shook his head.

(I don't know anything... nothing...!)

"Do not lie, Justice!" Suddenly, a stern young man's voice demanded. "Then what is that mark! Look closely at your own hands!"

At those words, Justice looked down at his own hands. His vision turned completely red. The moment he realized the true nature of the eerie glow, Justice lost consciousness.

He wanted to believe it was a nightmare - but he had been fighting that nightmare for two whole years now.

It all began there. Justice's trials, and Justice's journey. Two years with not a single clue - but the brutal scene before him brought back a vivid memory of the father Justice had been searching for. "Why are you here... Why...?" Justice repeated the words

like a mantra, his gaze darting around. He tossed aside his staff and shouted into the twilight of the inn town. "Dad, it's me! Answer me, Dad! Dad!"

He suddenly dashed into a nearby shop and kept shouting inside the empty store. "Where are you, Dad! You're here, aren't you! Dad! Dad!" He opened door after door, kicking merchandise aside, and even when he stumbled, he didn't stop calling out. Riot stared in stunned silence at his frenzied behavior.

(Justice, you... you really... Did you want to see him that much...) She was only now realizing it.

Even though it was a journey to find his father, he hadn't walked around asking everyone he met without a second thought. Justice gladly lent his strength whenever asked, and never hesitated to make detours. It wasn't that he was holding back; he simply devoted himself purely to helping people. In fact, he had put off his own goal to the point of making Riot impatient. But now...

"Dad! Dad!"

Riot held back the emotions welling up in her chest and ran over to Justice. "Calm down, Justice. Calm down."

"But Dad is here... He must be here...!"

"There's no way to know that. It's just the same situation as when he disappeared." She pulled the boy's wrist firmly and placed the staff she had picked up into his hand. "The enemy might still be lurking around here. It's dangerous for you to wander off on your own."

It was meant to be a tone that brooked no argument - but Justice firmly shook Riot's hand away. "No way, Riot! I'm staying here to look for Dad! I'm going to find a clue about Dad! There's gotta be something! Please!"

"Justice! I'm doing this for your own good!" Riot raised her voice as well. "Listen, you're not acting like yourself. What's with all this agitation?"

"Of course I'm agitated! I mean, finally..."

"Listen to me, Holy Warrior Justice!" She snapped at him with a voice like thunder. "You're always saying it yourself. That the Evil Gods and Blood Pact members prey on the cracks in human hearts. To defeat you right now, even a low-ranking Evil God would be more than enough."

At those words, Justice gasped. Even at thirteen, as a divine representative chosen to fight the Evil Gods... his sense of responsibility as a Holy Crusader was stronger than anyone else's. He picked up the Holy Staff — the proof of that responsibility — tightly. Then she exhaled deeply. "I'm sorry. You're right... You're absolutely right..." The boy slowly turned around and made the sign of the cross at the heartbreaking sight. Perhaps ashamed of himself for having forgotten even a prayer of mourning, his eyes remained closed longer than usual.

(He's right though, could this really be...?) Riot, too, calmly surveyed her surroundings. She had scolded Justice, but she, too, wanted a clue. I want to find something for him. Just as she thought that...

"Justice!" Riot let out a sharp warning. At the tip of the Holy War Staff the boy held, the rare gem Metalite emitted a strange red glow.

Justice opened his eyes and spun around at the appearance of this extraordinary aura. "Over there, Riot!"

Both of them turned to look behind them at the same time.

A sudden gust of wind swept through the street, bathed in the setting sun, and vanished. Immediately afterward, numerous distortions appeared on the ground. Like ripples, the invisible wall separating the dimensions began to tremble, and a blue-green figure gradually emerged from another world.

"Dea... Dea... Idel... Buzornie Dea... Dea... Zoel..." Slippery, wet, bony legs writhed from within the dimensional distortion. The legs, each bearing three unusually long fingers, rustled restlessly like a spider's. The legs eventually grew to four, and a spherical torso was positioned at the base of the arms. The torso possessed a shell resembling that of a hermit crab, and the main body hidden within remained unseen. It merely dripped white mucus steadily from the cracks in the shell. There were four of them.

"The magical energy emission level is over 400."

"Evil God Count-class? So these things are the ones that..." Just as she began to speak, Justice leaped to the right.

At the same moment, the two Evil Spirits in the front spat high-velocity mucus from within their shells.

Riot narrowly avoided the attack by jumping backwards as well. The ground where the mucus landed began to melt with a sizzling sound.

"I don't know what's going on, but we're getting out of here!" Riot darted into a narrow alley to dodge the fire.

Justice dove into a shop on the opposite side. In pursuit, the four Demon Gods scattered to the left and right. Moving at a speed that defied their massive size—almost like a sprint — they crashed into the shop and surged into the alley.

"Dea! Zoel! Dea!" Screaming in their bizarre language, they smashed through the walls of the building on all fours, kicking over furniture. Aiming at Justice as she dashed back into the street, they fired a rapid barrage of slime.

"These guys are fast!" Screaming, Justice slammed himself into the shop window. He tumbled to the ground amid a shower of shards, but quickly regained his composure and raised his Holy War Staff. "First Strike!" He deftly curled the fingers of his right hand, forming the Holyu Seal. Justice thrust that sacred seal toward the two creatures rampaging inside the shop.

But from behind him, one of the creatures — which should have been chasing Riot — had turned on a dime and returned. "Dea! Zoel! Dea!"

"Justice, get down!" The Demon God swung its long foreleg upward, bringing its claws crashing down on the boy's back - but as if to drown out the Evil God's roar, Riot's furious shout followed in hot pursuit. The Battle Armor Demon kicked off the ground and leaped as if dancing, then brought her Electromagnetic Greatsword crashing down from a high stance. First, she severed one of the Demon God's forelegs clean through the center, then flicked the blade upward at blinding speed. Next, she sliced off the remaining foreleg from below. It was a massive weapon, its blade over a meter long - and yet she swung it effortlessly, as if it were a twig.

This was not a power granted to humans. It is a feat only possible for an artificial lifeform whose entire body—except for the brain—has been mechanized, equipped with countless weapons, and specialized for combat. The embodiment of slaughter and destruction: the Battle Armor Demon. Though it was not a power she sought, the battlefield was where Riot belonged.

"Dea! Zoel! Dea!" Having lost both legs, the Demon God continues its charge, writhing in agony - spraying blue-green bodily fluid from his severed legs, he still tried to latch onto Justice.

Riot switched her greatsword to a one-handed grab and swiftly pulled out the prosthetic section of her left arm. "You're persistent, and you're noisy!" The black barrel of a 5.56mm submachine gun was exposed. Aiming the three muzzles at the Demon God, Riot unleashed a barrage of bullets, giving the Evil Spirit no quarter. Though a Demon God's body was impervious to physical attacks, it could not withstand a hail of bullets made of holy steel Zodanium fired at point-blank range. It was forced to retreat, whether it liked it or not.

And while Riot was busy driving back one of them, Justice was channeling his thoughts into his clasped fingertips. That sacred seal was summoning the supreme power into the staff held by the boy. The Father of all and the Mother of all. The Creator. Aeolus, the God of Creation, had entrusted its power... its miracle... to this boy. To Justice, the Holy War Officer — he who fights against the Evil Gods, a representative of the Supreme Deity.

"Circumventing Impact Bullets!" The holy light burst from his fingertips, split into four and soared through the air. The offensive miracle charged head-on at the two Evil Spirits that had burst out of the shop. But...

"Dea! Zoel! Dea!"

"Dammit!"

The roars of the Evil Spirits and Justice's voice clashed. As the two Evil Gods spread their front legs wide to the left and right, a band of red plasma unfurled between them. The miracle Justice had unleashed collided head-on with that barrier and scattered.

"So they had a trump card after all!" Gritting his teeth, Justice linked up with Riot.

The four Evil Gods tightened their encirclement once more, continuing to unleash plasma to counter the miracles.

"Justice, I don't think the Circumventing Impact will be enough for these guys!"

"I know. I'll take them down with the Sacred Inferno Strike!" The boy prepared to summon a new, even more powerful miracle while Riot reached for the grenades at his waist to buy some time.

But behind her, Justice suddenly dropped to his knees.

"Justice, what's wrong...?" She looked away from the approaching Evil God for a moment and turned back to her partner.

There stood Justice, trembling violently as he stared down at his own hands.

"Ah... ahhh..." Justice's voice was a mixture of shock and terror. The backs of both the boy's hands had begun to flicker red. At the center of them, a bizarrely twisted pattern was rising up eerily.

"No... You're kidding, right... Justice..." Riot, too, couldn't believe what she was seeing.
The emblem of the Evil God Emperor Lucifer — a symbol known to every inhabitant of the continent.
A mark of evil that appears when three miracles are summoned, regardless of Justice's will - but Justice had only performed one miracle so far, yet the heretical emblem had indeed appeared on the boy's hands, and his consciousness was rapidly fading.
"Ri... Riot..." The Holy War Staff clattered to the ground, and Justice collapsed in a faint.

Riot swiftly slipped her prosthetic arm into her left sleeve and scooped up his frail body in a side-hug. "Why now, Justice! Why?!"

"Dea! Zoel! Dea!" The Evil Spirits charged forward in unison.

Faced with colossal forms charging from all four directions, Riot, having slung her greatsword back onto her back, leapt into the air without hesitation. She kicked off the sky, aiming for the nearest Demon God, and dodged its advancing forelegs. Kicking off its carapace, she leapt again. With the Holy War Staff in her right hand and Justice cradled in her left, the Battle Armor Demon forcefully broke through the encirclement.

(I can't fight them alone!) No matter how extraordinary Riot's combat prowess might be, taking on four Demon Lords was simply too reckless. Without Justice's miracle, victory was impossible.

But more than that, Riot had finally sensed the scent of a trap filling the air - it could only mean that someone was behind this. Sensing the presence of an unprecedented enemy, Riot's heartbeat quickened.

As if to fan the flames of her anxiety, the Evil Gods launched a fierce pursuit. "Dea! Zoel! Dea!" Slime projectiles were fired one after another at Riot as she fled. Unlike before, this time the slime exploded. The ground shook, and clods of earth flew through the air. If she fled into an alley, the houses on either side would be blown to pieces.

As splinters of wood rained down from above, Riot let out a scream. "Wake up, Justice! You've got one more in you, right?!"

But the boy in her arms lay limp, his face pale. "Justice! Wake up, come on, Justice!"

"Dea! Zoel! Dea!" Suddenly, explosions erupted one after another. And right up close.

By the time she realized it, Riot's body had been blown dozens of meters away. "Aaaahhh!"

Justice's Holy War Staff slipped from her grasp. Clutching the boy, the Battle Armor Demon tumbled to the ground. The impact caused the text on his retinal display to flicker, and the Battle Armor Demon writhed in agony as if her bones were shattering.

"Gah... Aaah..." Her lips were pressed against the ground. Dirt and sand clung to her red hair.

"Dea... Deaidel..."

"Buzornie... Dea... Dea Zoel..." Convinced of their victory, the Evil Spirits approached the two with unhurried ease.

Sensing their presence, Riot forcefully shook her aching head. "I won't let you do this..." Riot shot a defiant glance at them, refusing to give up. "I won't let the likes of you take Justice...!"

She squeezed out every last drop of strength she thought was gone. She didn't care if he died. No, she wouldn't rest until she'd fought to the death. To protect Justice.

But the boy in her arms remained unconscious. Riot slowly sat up and tried to block the path of the Demon God.

"Even if I die, I'll protect this child... Come at me!" As the Demon God's joints creaked and groaned, Riot stretched her aching arm toward her waist.

(If I can fire just one shot, I might be able to take advantage of that opening...) Keeping the Demon God in her blurred vision, Riot's hand searched for her pistol.

But suddenly, everything before her eyes was blanketed in pure white. Shaking off the pain in her head, she opened her eyes once more.

Before she knew it, a figure clad in white armor stood upright before her. When he turned around, she saw a young man with white hair flowing down to his shoulders.

"Don't move. This will be over soon."

Stared at by his pale green eyes, Riot's heart suddenly felt at ease for some reason.

The color of a rustling green forest, bathed in that dazzling sunlight. Even in the midst of battle, Riot found the man's eyes beautiful.

"W-who are you...?" But the moment she spoke, Riot's consciousness went dark.

"Impact exceeding tolerance limits has affected the power reactor. Re-inspection is required. All active functions temporarily terminated. Initiating re-inspection of all functions. Will restart after inspection is complete." As the final message imprinted itself on her retina, Riot collapsed to the ground.

"Why would anyone fight so hard..." The man stroked his sharp chin and looked down at Riot with a puzzled expression. Soon, his gaze was drawn to the red emblem on Justice, who lay fallen beside him. He held his breath for a moment, then exhaled sharply. "For this guy... huh..."

He ran a hand through his white hair and muttered the words as if to himself. Then, he slowly turned around.

The four Demon Lords raised their front paws in unison, their claws wrapped in green lightning. The glow of offensive magic shone unabashedly on the man's face - but the man did not lower his gaze; instead, he spoke with a faint smile.

"Go on. I have no interest in you." In a tone of persuasion, he dismissed the Evil Gods. "Return and tell your master to never lay a hand on this land again."

But the Evil Gods answered with a roar. They unleashed their magical lightning bolts at the man.

Even so, the man's smile did not fade.

Not a single star remained in the sky; only darkness seemed poised to spread.

It was the night sky of the New Continent, having lost all its constellations.

Even in the heat of battle, Riot found herself captivated by the man's eyes.

【Chapter 1: Wilder Village / Holy War General】

It is said that there were once eight continents on this planet. Under the protection of Aeolus, the God of Creation, human civilization enjoyed a long era of prosperity - but Lucifer, the Emperor of Evil Gods, brought that era to an end. Leading an army of hundreds of millions of Evil Spirits, he banished the God of Creation to the far reaches of darkness. Through his peerless magical power, the constellations were scattered, and the sun was obscured by demonic clouds. The eight continents collided, and the upheaval swallowed eight billion humans in a sea of fire and tsunami.

The "Ancient Catastrophe." Two thousand years have passed since that apocalypse.

The humans who escaped annihilation were still waging war against the Evil Spirits on a new continent.

The New Continent. It was the battlefield between the Evil Spirits and humanity.

There was nothing around. Only a pure white expanse stretched out endlessly.

Riot felt as though he had been wandering that white world for years.

(Justice?) She tried calling out the boy's name.

Suddenly, in the distant horizon, Justice appeared, clad in white sacred robes.

(Justice, what are you doing?)

He stood there motionless, his back turned toward her. No answer came, even when she called out.

When she tried to approach, Riot's legs refused to move forward. Shaking off the clinging white void, Riot called the boy's name once more.

(Justice, it's me. Can't you hear me?) At the sound of her voice, Justice finally reacted.

He turned to face Riot, as if teasing her with his slowness.

(I can hear you, Riot. My dad is calling me.) The boy's light blue eyes sparkled, and he smiled happily.

(Dad... ...You, you met your dad...?)

(Yeah, I met him. I finally got to see him.) At this sudden confession, Riot's heart ached sharply. (I-I see... I'm so glad for you, Justice.)

(Yeah. It's all thanks to you, Riot.) Justice smiled happily and waved gently at Riot. (So our journey is over now, too. Thanks for everything, Riot. I guess this is goodbye.)

At those words, something welled up in the back of Riot's throat. (I guess so... You're going to...)

(I'm going with Dad. What are you going to do, Riot?) Justice tilted his head slightly as his figure receded into the distance. (Now that we're parting ways, what are you going to do? Do you have anywhere to go?)

Suddenly, the floor beneath Riot's feet collapsed. Justice's smile rapidly faded into the distance.

Riot reached out toward the boy as if clinging to him. (I... I don't have anywhere to go... not like that...)

The world went dark, swallowed by the void. Even so, Riot kept desperately reaching out toward the boy receding into the distance.

(Justice... I... I...)

"Justice!" Her struggling hand clenched the sheets tightly. Then she was struck by shock.
(Sheets... a bed...!) Riot woke up and strained her eyes in the dim darkness. Text quietly formed rows on her artificial retina.
"Power reactor re-inspection complete. All functions re-inspected. Restart complete." Wiping the sweat from his brow, Riot surveyed the room.
A simple little room built of logs. Riot was sitting up on the small bed. On the sofa next to her, Justice slept wrapped in a blanket, and the room was completely silent. Beside them, Riot and Justice's belongings were packed away - including the greatsword and the Holy War Staff. It was dark outside the window, and the time display glowing on his retina showed it was late night.
Inhaling the scent of logs filling the room, Riot took a deep breath. "What the hell is this...?" Unable to make sense of the situation, Riot covered her forehead with her hand.
Her body was still clad in her usual leather armor. There were no external injuries. Where had the four Evil Lords gone? How had she escaped from that perilous situation? She had absolutely no idea. No...
(That man...) Finally, she recalled his smile.At the same moment, she heard the sound of a chair creaking from the corner of the room.
"You seem to be having trouble waking up."
Riot's heart leapt, her pulse racing. She hadn't even sensed his presence. It was the voice of a young man he recognized.
"Who are you?!"
"Regios." In response to the demand, the man slowly identified himself. "I am the master of this house. I suppose I can tell you that much." Saying this, the man rose from his chair, took the lamp in hand, and approached Riot's bed.
White hair flowing down to his shoulders. Green eyes. It was indeed the man who had appeared at the post town of Bazara.
But instinctively, the Battle Armor Demon began to activate the Flame-Heat Sword concealed in his arm.
However, sensing that, the man who had identified himself as Regios chuckled softly. "Hold your fire. The child is sleeping."
"If you come any closer..."
"Come on... You're disturbing the peace in the middle of the night." With a smile, he slipped effortlessly into Riot's range.
Riot was taken aback. Her ironclad rule was to fire the moment someone entered her range. But Regios had dodged that timing with ease. Her killing intent had been read at the very last moment, leaving Riot with no choice but to look on in dismay.
"Did you save me?"
"Maybe. Maybe not."
"What's that supposed to mean? Who are you?"
"You want to know? I couldn't care less, though. Who you are, or who that kid with you is." Regios sat down on Riot's bed and peered at Justice's sleeping face.

Riot held her breath and glared at his profile.
In the lamplight, there wasn't a trace of malice in Regios's expression - but Riot knew better. This man wasn't letting his guard down. And he wasn't showing even a hint of that wariness.
(He's a tough nut to crack...) It wasn't unpleasant, but it wasn't exactly pleasant either.
He was probably around twenty years old. Yet, for his age, he had a strangely mature air about him. He had taken off his armor, but his eyes held a predatory tenacity and a cold, calculating intelligence.
If he had saved her, who was he?
Last time she saw him, he was fighting the four Evil Gods. They were by no means enemies he could take on alone. If he were to defeat them, he would need a miracle of considerable power. At the very least, one surpassing Justice. Otherwise, he could be a Blood Sworn. Riot hesitated to breathe a sigh of relief.
"You saw it, didn't you...?"
"Saw what?"
"Don't play dumb. This boy's..." She started to speak, then bit her lip.
Justice must have been discovered by Regios while still bearing the mark of the Heretical Sect. But even Riot hesitated to speak the name of the Heretical God Emperor.
"You're worrying about the strangest things." Suddenly smiling, Regios pulled a glass bottle from the table beside him. "I don't help suspicious people. I wouldn't even let a suspicious person into my house."
"But you did help me after all. But..."
"Drink up. Your voice is hoarse." Regios poured the golden liquid from the bottle into a glass. "It's Tete tea with honey. It's nice and cold."
Indeed, Riot's throat was parched from tension and exhaustion. Her suspicions were gradually dispelled by Regios's smile. Nodding, Riot took the glass and drained it in one gulp.
"Another one?"
"Ah, yeah, thanks..." Finally catching her breath as the cold Tete tea went down her throat, Riot shifted her position. "I'm late in saying this, but... thanks for saving me."
"Hmm... well, it's fine."
"Where are we? What are we going to do now...?"
"Let's not get into complicated stuff at a time like this." Scratching the back of his neck, Regios walked back toward his chair. "I'll hear the story tomorrow. That is, if tomorrow comes."
"What do you mean?"
"It means nothing in this world is certain. Good night." With that, Regios pulled a ragged blanket over himself and leaned back in his chair.
Riot twisted her mouth in frustration. "Hey, are you planning on sleeping in this room with me?"
"Don't shout so loud — you'll wake the kids."
"Oh... but sleeping on a chair..."

"You're using my bed. So this is fine." He turned away, looking exasperated. Riot bowed her head toward Regios's back.
"I've said this many times, but... thank you."
"It's fine. You're a guest, and you're a woman."
At those words, Riot clenched the sheets tightly. "I... I'm not just any ordinary woman."
"So, you're a special woman, then. That's fine too." Saying only that, he quickly began to snore.
Watching his broad back rise and fall with each breath, Riot found herself smiling for some reason.
(I haven't even told him my name yet. What a weirdo...) Suddenly, she caught the scent of the sheets she was clutching. It smelled just like Regios. The tension in her body melted away, and her heart settled.
Just then, Justice rolled over on the sofa next to her.
"Ugh... mm..." The edge of the blanket flipped up, and a small hand slipped out from beneath it. That hand was covered in white bandages. The heretical mark shouldn't have completely faded yet - but the bandages were wrapped thickly and carefully, as if to completely hide the accursed emblem.
(Regios...) Riot tucked Justice's hand back under the blanket and gently wiped away his night sweat.
Then, once more, Riot turned to look at his broad back. The man said nothing; he seemed to have already sunk into a peaceful sleep.
(What on earth are you...) The question on his mind was drawn toward the wall.
Right next to Regios, two small swords were leaning against the wall.
Even in this cramped room, it would be easy to swing those around.
(I wonder if he trusts me... or not.) Stopping his speculation, Riot pulled up the sheets that carried his scent. For a moment, her gaze was fixed on Regios's back.

The sound of deep breathing echoed in the darkness. The darkness occasionally turned a reddish-black, swirling and growling. Deep within the warped fabric of space-time, silent flashes of lightning raced about, momentarily illuminating the surroundings.
Even so, it was impossible to make out the physical form behind the sound of breathing. Did it even possess what could be called a physical form?
Breathing darkness. The entity — for no other name would fit it — simply continued to stare at the rift in space-time. What was reflected there was the profile of Justice, sleeping peacefully.
"It seems you're still concerned, after all..." Suddenly, a low voice echoed from the surroundings. "Even though I set a foolproof trap, I suppose I must verify whether I've truly captured him."
The surrounding darkness rumbled, and the dimension shook violently. Then, a massive, raging flame appeared, forming a ring. As the ring of flame approached the black shadow, its intensity grew even stronger.
"Step back a little, Your Majesty the Evil God King" The black shadow shifted its gaze away from Justice and sighed at the ring of fire. "Your flames are too intense. I am a man from a cold land."

"For you, a blood-sworn vassal directly under the command of the Demon Emperor, to complain... Hah, humans really are strange creatures. Are you bound to your homeland even after losing your physical form?"

"Your flames, Your Majesty the Demon King, once scorched half of the Guiana Continent. It is no wonder they are so hot." The black shadow offered perfunctory praise to the ring of flames it addressed as the Demon King.

The Demon King paid no heed to the insincere words, merely smiling as he adjusted his form to become smaller. He was not a being to be treated with disrespect.

Twelfth rank: Demon Soldier/Servant-class. Number: 500 million.

Eleventh rank: Demon Captain-class. Number: 50 million.

Tenth rank: Demon Demon-class. Number: 2 million.

9th Rank: Evil God Knight Class. Number: Several hundred thousand.

8th Rank: Evil God Earl Class. Number: 10,000.

7th Rank: Evil God Count Class. Number: 1,000.

6th Rank: Evil God General Class. Number: Several hundred.

5th Place: Evil God Official Class. Number: 48.

4th Place: Evil God King Class. Number: 16.

3rd Place: Evil God Marshal Class. Number: 8.

2nd Place: Evil God Duke Class. Number: 4.

And the sole occupant of 1st Place: the Evil God Emperor.

Within the Evil God Emperor's army, which totals over 500 million, the might of the 4th-rank, an Evil God King is quite formidable.

Those sixteen were the main force that annihilated the Eight Continents during the "Ancient Catastrophe." They are beings that Blood Pact members must never underestimate.

However, the one with whom the Black Shadow formed a Blood Pact was the Absolute Evil God Emperor. It can be said that he is the one permitted to wield the power that banished the God of Creation. It was no wonder that the Evil God King struggled to deal with him.

"A sure trap, is it...? Indeed, I cannot offer a better bait than this."

"How modest of you, Blood Pact. For someone who is the Evil God Emperor's right-hand man."

"But thanks to having wiped out a village, Justice will remain in this land for a while."

"And what am I supposed to do in the meantime?"

"I want you to prepare a fitting welcome for him." The black shadow issued a stern command in a voice that brooked no argument. "For that is the Dark God Emperor's decree."

"So you intend to end his ordeal?"

"That is, if it ends. Whether we have the power to end it..."

"Is it your role to find out? Very well." The Dark God King intensified his aura and let out a cunning, roaring laugh. "I must thank you. To be able to participate in the scheme to bring Justice into our ranks..."

"It took three years. Failure is not an option."

"Three years... It may be a long time for humans, but for us Evil Gods, it is but a fleeting moment." With that, the Evil God King shifted his gaze slightly away from Justice. "However, that man is there. He was an unforeseen factor."
"I've heard his name, too."
"He probably knows your name as well, doesn't he? It's a case of tit for tat." The Demon King roared as he blazed with fury, laughing off fate, but the Blood Oath member responded with a sigh. "This encounter is an unfortunate coincidence. He will be a greater obstacle than we imagined. But that doesn't mean we'll give up."
Gazing at the sleeping Regios' profile, the Blood Pact Member quietly stoked his fighting spirit.

Faint morning sunlight streamed in through the window. As if to escape that sliver of light, she rolled over. But just as Riot was savoring a deep sleep, something heavy suddenly fell on top of him.
"Yay, thud!"
"Guh!" She let out a scream that didn't sound like it came from a sixteen-year-old girl and woke up.
Riot, who had been tossing and turning in bed, frantically rolled onto her side.
"W-what is it? Ugh!"
"Big sis, it's morning!" A girl she didn't recognize was lying on top of Riot.
"Who... who are you?!"
"I'm Anna."
"I'm Sheena."
One after another, two, then three of them dove onto the bed.
"Wake up, big sis!"
"Yay, me too! Thud!"
"O-oh, you're heavy... I'm gonna die..." Scratching at her bedhead, Riot sat up.
Looking over, Justice was nowhere to be seen on the sofa next to her, and the blanket was neatly folded.
"What's with you guys?"
"What's with you guys?" Mimicking Riot's question, the girl who introduced herself as Anna was giggling.
Still half-asleep, Riot stood up and let the children lead her to the door. Just then, Regios turned to face her with a smile.
"You woke up surprisingly early. How was our house alarm?"
"I'd love to see anyone who couldn't wake up to that, honestly."
With a weary sigh, Riot straightened her back.
The room was quite spacious. In the center stood a long, sturdy wooden table. Regios was efficiently setting out breakfast on the table. He snatched up a pot where eggs and vegetables were sizzling and began serving them onto plates one after another. The room was already filled with the aroma of hot Guiana coffee.
"Wait a minute, how many servings is this?"
"Sixteen, since you guys are here this morning. Though thirteen of them are kids."
"No way... You didn't make all of these yourself..."

"Come on, am I some kind of human factory? Just so you know, I'm single."
"Then, how on earth..."
"Let's not get into complicated stuff over breakfast. Besides, it's ready." Regios smiled and pointed outside the house. "There's a well over there. Go wash your face. Let's eat."
"Ah, but..."
"Don't dawdle. Those kids have an appetite the size of a division. My kids aren't the type to leave leftovers for you." With that, he tossed a towel over.
Riot took it and decided to just nod. "Got it... Thanks."
"While you're at it, go call the folks in the stable. Justice is over there too."
"Huh? Why...?"
Seeing Riot's surprised expression, Regios put on a troubled look. "He's already up and helping the kids. He even told me his name. And yours, too, while you're at it... Riot." He called out to her casually. His guardedness from last night seemed to have melted away.
However, Riot had noticed Regios's efficient movements. Even while making breakfast, he kept his eyes on all sides, showing not a single moment of weakness. If anything happened, it would be no trouble at all for him to throw a nearby knife at her.
Even so, for some reason, he wasn't unpleasant to be around.
(Well, I guess I can't trust him right away...)
With an awkward smile, Riot stepped outside the house.
"Whoa..." I couldn't help but gasp at the breathtaking view.
Regios's house stood atop a gentle hill. The slopes were cloaked in green, and in the distant horizon, the mountain ranges of northern Guiana were crowned with snow. A dozen or so Atlas horses and twice as many dairy cows grazed on the lush pasture stretching out before me. Below the slopes, a small village was visible, and cultivated fields spread out here and there.
(It's so peaceful...) Although the blue skies she knew only from myths were absent, she never expected to find a place where she could truly relax in the New Continent. She took a deep breath without thinking.
Looking back, Regios's house stood behind her. It was a simple log cabin, but a sturdy two-story structure. The scent of wood suggested it was still new. The horse and cow stables were situated on a slope just a short distance from the house.
(Right! Justice!)
From the surprisingly large building, the voices of children could already be heard. Riot spotted her partner.
Justice was holding a mop in his hand, wiping the sweat from his brow as he swept up the chaff. He had a smile on his face, but his hand was still wrapped in bandages. Several boys were playing around him.
"Hey, Lord Justice, have you remembered my name yet?"
"Um, you're... Matthew... right?"
"And me?.."
"Uh, you're Bordan..."

"No way! I'm Voltas!"
"Oh, right. Sorry, sorry. There are so many of you, I haven't been able to remember yet." Seeing Justice's troubled expression, Riot let out a sigh of relief.
It was only the day after yesterday. She might have been worried that something had changed in his body... Realizing that such anxiety had been dispelled, Riot waved to her partner.
"Justice, over here."
"Riot!" When he turned around at the call, Justice approached, still clutching a mop.
Several boys were still swarming around him.
"Good morning. Regios asked me to clean out the stables."
"That's great, but Justice, your leg..." Riot immediately noticed the boy's awkward movements.
But with a smile, Justice tugged at the hem of his shirt to show him. The boy's right ankle was carefully bandaged. "Yeah, I think I sprained it. It hurts a little."
"I'm sorry, I couldn't protect you..."
"It's okay. More importantly, Riot..."
The two fell silent for a moment, staring at each other.
Just then, Regios's voice rang out from the house behind them. "Hurry up! The food's gonna get cold!"
"Whoa, Lord Justice, let's go!" The boys, realizing what was happening, tugged at his sleeve.
Nodding and smiling, Justice gave them a gentle push on the back. "Yeah, I'm fine. You guys, go ahead without me."
"If you don't hurry, it'll be gone!" The boys cheerfully dashed into the house. Watching them disappear, a shadow finally crossed Justice's face.
"I don't really remember, but..."
"Justice..."
"It's true that I couldn't use the miracle, right? I could only use it once, and then the Heretical Mark appeared..."
"That wasn't a dream, was it?" Justice dropped the mop to the floor and gripped Riot's arms tightly.
Riot wanted to tell him that it was a dream. But she simply nodded quietly. "There's no point in thinking about it now. We need to treat your injuries first. Once that's done...."
"There's definitely something about that post town. I want to go back to that inn town one more time. We will go back, right, Riot? Is that fine with you?"
"I understand," Riot replied, patting her partner on the shoulder. "Don't rush, Justice. I'll think it over carefully too."
"Yeah. But... I can't help but feel anxious."
"It'll be fine. And about the bandage on your hand... you shouldn't take it off." She offered a smile, yet her warning remained calm.
Unable to shake off his anxiety, Justice clenched his fist. "Regios... about my hand..."
"He must know. But that guy..." How should she interpret this? Even Riot still didn't know.

In the grasslands glowing with green, Riot sighed, the dark clouds in her heart weighing heavy.

The village visible at the foot of the hill was a settlement called Wilder.
No city-states had yet been built on the Eternal Plains. On the contrary, because it straddled the border between Atlas and Guiana, neither side's Holy Church had any influence there. Naturally, the Eternal Plains became a free land, and many refugees poured in after overcoming the treacherous obstacles. The pioneer villages scattered throughout the region were built by them as they saw fit.

"So you guys are all..."

"Yeah, we're refugee children." The oldest boy, who introduced himself as Riggs, nodded at Riot.

"Everyone's towns and villages became uninhabitable due to magical contamination. Even if we moved somewhere else, farming or whatever, everywhere's short on food. We're all just a bunch of folks who couldn't get accepted anywhere else. Right?"

"Y-yeah..." A slender boy named Chris replied in a timid voice.

On the hillside where a pleasant breeze blew, Riggs and the others were brushing a black Atlas horse. The children working around them were feeding the horses and replacing their horseshoes. Even girls who looked to be only three or four years old were milking the huge dairy cows. Riot and Justice were also listening intently to Riggs's story while feeding fruit to the horses. "Brother Regios was the one who gathered us all up and brought us here. It's been three years now, I guess... The first year was really tough, but now we can harvest wheat and sell milk. Even this horse can be sold for a high price for farm work."

Riggs, with his chestnut-colored hair, said he was eleven. Even so, he looked more mature than his age. Riot could tell right away that he had survived a harsh life as a refugee.

"So Regios has been like a parent to all thirteen of you, then?"

"More than a parent! My real parents... ugh, I hate even thinking about them. After all, they tried to sell my organs just to feed themselves."

"You've got to be kidding..."

As Riggs said this matter-of-factly, Voltas chimed in from the side. "I was sold into slavery, you know. But Regios saved me."

"Joseph was abandoned, and I heard Liron was a slave too. But Chris had it even worse. He was infected with magic contamination, so slave traders wouldn't even buy him, and... well..." As Riggs trailed off, Chris gave a faint smile.

"Yeah, I was about to be sold to a butcher... as livestock." The pale-skinned boy said this, coughing. "If Regios hadn't saved me, I wonder what would've become of me."

Riot was momentarily speechless at the children's past.

They spoke of it casually, but it must be painful for them. And still, not a single one of them has tried to ask about Riot and Justice's past.

From just one look at her, it would be obvious to anyone that Riot is a cyborg. Those with painful pasts don't pry into others' pasts... Even though they're children, they all have their own code of conduct.

"A butcher's shop... That's just too cruel."

"I wish I could think that too. But it can't be helped — that's just how life is."

Riot couldn't help but smile at the way Chris spoke. It was as if he were imitating the way his foster father, Regios, spoke.

"You guys like Regios, don't you?"

"Yeah, of course... He's teaching us how to do this work, after all."

"I want to get better from my illness so I can help big bro Regios soon, too."

As Chris spoke, Riggs nodded and looked up at the Battle Armor Demon. "Hey, Riot, what do you think of big bro Regios?"

When asked, Riot shifted her gaze unnaturally. In the fields stretching out behind the house, Regios was alone, swinging a hoe to till the soil. Beads of sweat the size of pearls were streaming down from the nape of his neck to his chest like a waterfall.

"W-well, yeah, he did help us out, after all. I'm grateful to him."

"No, that's not it, Riot. I'm asking what you're feeling for him."

Suddenly, Justice tugged on her sleeve. "He saved us. Of course we're grateful!"

"What are you talking about? We just met him yesterday — I don't have any particular feelings for him, good or bad."

"Whaaaat? So you don't like Regios?" When Justice asked that, Riggs spoke up too.

"Big bro Regios usually doesn't let girls get close to him. But he brought big sis Riot back with him, so we're all surprised."

"Exactly. Even the women in the village rarely venture here..." As Chris chimed in, Justice crossed his arms.

"I see. So does that mean Regios thinks Riot is special?"

Pushing aside Justice, who was deep in thought, Riot sat down on the grass. "Don't go thinking such cheeky things. Ugh, I'm exhausted. You take care of the horses."

"Whoa, you're slacking off! I got saved and even got a place to stay, so I won't feel right unless I at least help out a little."

"That's just you. I'm done." With that, she flopped onto her back on the grass. She stretched out her limbs and let out a huge yawn.

(Still, that guy...) Regios's profile floated into view amidst the sea of clouds passing overhead.

(I don't think he's a bad guy. But I couldn't bring myself to ask the children who he really was. Since he used a miracle that likely surpassed Justice's to defeat the four Evil God Lords, he might be a Paladin of quite high rank. Yet here he was, a man like that, leading a group of refugee children and working hard in the fields in this remote frontier.)

I couldn't help but think there must be a reason. And if that reason was a tragic one...

(I can't ask him, can I...) Like the refugee children, Riot had also lived his life burdened by a dark past.

At a young age, my entire body — except for my brain — was mechanized, and I was forced to fight "Mutant Beasts," lifeforms mutated by magic. I've lived on the battlefield ever since I can remember. Sometimes I fought for money; other times, I didn't. Just thinking about who I was back then makes me want to vomit. If Regios has a past like that, I don't want to pry. But for some reason...

"You left me alone, didn't you?"

"Wha...!?" Suddenly, a sweat-drenched smile peered down at Riot, who was lying on her back. She jumped up in a panic to find Regios standing behind her, a hoe in his hand, as if he'd been there all along.

"W-what's with you, all of a sudden...!?"

"I called out to you. You just didn't notice."

"N-no way... I didn't hear a thing!"

Justice, standing nearby, turned around in puzzlement.
"It's true. Mister Regios did call you, Riot. Were you thinking about something?"
"W-well, all sorts of things... There are worries that kids wouldn't understand."
"Whaaaat? What kind of worries? Your face is all red!"
When asked, Riot lay back down on the ground once more. "W-well, we can't stay here forever, can we? I was just thinking about when we should leave."
"Oh, I see..." Letting go of the feed bucket, Justice's expression turned serious.
But Regios calmly sat down next to Riot. "Are you leaving already?"
"Y-yeah, well... there's a reason!"
"Hmm, I see." Regios said only that and stopped prying. As always, he was masterful at stepping into people's personal space. And yet, he maintained his own distance. The movements of a martial artist.
At the scent of Regios, who had suddenly drawn near, Riot shifted her body slightly away. "Besides, I can't keep relying on your help forever, and I'm sure it's a hassle for you..."
"It's no hassle for me, you know."
"But you've got so many kids to take care of already — adding us to the mix..."
"Riggs, is this a hassle for you?" Ignoring Riot's words, Regios turned to the boy. "When we have guests, does it ever cause you any trouble?"
Riggs shook his head vigorously to deny it. "Don't joke around. Lord Justice is a Holy Crusader. To say he's a burden..."
"Hey, hey, are you saying we're letting him stay just because he's a Holy Crusader?"
"You're saying that kind of twisted thing again, even though you know better."
Exasperated by the man who acted as a surrogate father, Riggs turned to Justice. "Please stay with us, Lord Justice. Come on, it's okay, right?"
"U-uh, well, I'd love to, but..."
"Besides, we want to hear lots of stories about your travels!"
"That's right! We want to hear them!" Anna, who had come running over in a panic, clung to Justice's leg.
Before they knew it, the children had stopped what they were doing and gathered around.
Some of the children looked anxious, worried that Justice might leave. In just half a day — no, in just a few hours — Justice seemed to have captured the children's hearts. Satisfied with their expressions, Regios's smile widened.
"It's fine to go, but Justice has a sprained ankle. Crossing the mountains ahead will be tough." Wiping the sweat from his brow, he spoke to Riot. "Besides, it's sunny now, but the rainy season isn't over yet. The downpours around here can turn the highway into a river. If you're okay with that, I won't stop you."
Faced with that triumphant smile, Riot could only look troubled. He didn't look like someone plotting a conspiracy. But was that enough to trust him?
Still, Riot had no choice but to rely on her own instincts. "W-well, sorry about that..."
"It's settled, then." With that, he stood up and hoisted the hoe onto his shoulder once more. "Riggs, we're having a welcome party for our guests tonight. We're grabbing dinner at Jimka's place, got it?"
Cheers erupted at those words, but only Chris looked down, his face pale.

Regios noticed the look on his face immediately. "What's wrong? Feeling sick? Don't push yourself — you should rest."
"I-I'm fine. I'm okay."
"When you say that, it means you're pushing yourself. You're staggering, aren't you? Look." Regios set the hoe down and effortlessly scooped Chris into his arms.
Perhaps because everyone was watching, Chris kicked his legs and blushed. "Stop it, this is embarrassing!"
"Shut up. Kids are supposed to lean on adults."
"Ugh, I hate this... I..." Smiling, Regios carried Chris and started walking toward the house.
Justice watched his back with a look of admiration.
"Mr. Regios is a nice guy, isn't he? He really cares about everyone."
"Hmm... I guess so."
"But he doesn't seem like an ordinary person. How did he save us?" Riot found herself at a loss for words. Justice hadn't witnessed Regios's miracle either, but even Riot couldn't explain the reason. The more she thought about it, the more mysterious the man seemed.

A pure white universe. A closed space existing on the same timeline as the Eight Continents.
The Pope's Temple. That was the name given to this alternate dimension. This space, known only by name to the Holy Church's followers, was protected by multiple layers of dimensional barriers to ward off all attacks, invasions, and magical contamination from the Evil Spirits.
The eight clergymen gathered in silence, gazing at the map of the entire planet projected onto the round table.
The thin, scholar-like young man was the Gray Pope, who ruled the Volga region in the far north.
The burly, bearded warrior was the Black Pope, who ruled the Saxony region.
The intelligent man with the hooked nose was the Red Pope, who ruled the Romana region.
The stern-looking old man was the White Pope, who ruled the Atlas region, the largest in the New World.
The young woman with dark skin was the Green Pope, who ruled the Guiana region, located directly on the equator.
The woman with black hair tied in buns on either side was the Yellow Pope, who ruled the Yamato region.
The gaunt old man was the Blue Pope, who ruled the desertified Islama region.
The one whose hair is adorned with countless decorative beads is the Purple Pope, who rules the Afros region at the southernmost tip.
The regions that were once the Eight Continents were colored on the map according to each Pope's respective hue.
And besides those eight, there were three others...
The youngest, a youth of dazzling beauty, was the Golden Pope.

Beside him, the old man quietly stroking his long beard was the Silver Pope.
With the two flanking her, the woman turning her sorrowful profile toward the planet was the Rainbow Pope.
"A report has come in," the Rainbow Pope, who served as the Chief Pope, announced in a gentle voice. "It is said that a single post town has vanished in the north of the Eternal Plains."
For a council entrusted with the fate of all humanity, it was a trivial incident.
Yet everyone silently understood that there must be a reason the Rainbow Pope had chosen to speak of it.
"I hear the heads of the innkeepers were impaled on spears and left on display. Twelve spears, to be exact."
"You're not suggesting it's the same as that time, are you?" The Silver Pope spoke as if coughing, then looked around the round table.
"Now then, would it be foolish of me to think that Eisen has begun to make his move?"
"You're too straightforward, old man. I don't understand what you're implying." The first to answer was the Red Pope.
"That frontier region should hold no strategic significance whatsoever. Even if it is one of the few areas spared from magical contamination... surely that is all there is to it?"
"Then what of tactical significance?" The Gray Pope asked, adjusting his askew glasses. "Even if it is merely a demonstration, once we've witnessed that, we cannot remain passive. Depending on the situation, we may have to dispatch an investigation team from our own papal regiments."
"You mean to lull us into thinking it's a minor incident and then trap us? That's far too roundabout." Speaking in an uncharacteristically plain tone, the Green Pope tapped the round table with her finger. "Or do you mean there's some significance we're unaware of?"
At that question, the Rainbow Pope gave a slight nod. "Justice, the Pilgrim Crusader, has gone to that land."
Suddenly, a subtle tension and surprise spread through the room.
"Surely not... a trap..." Even the Red Pope, known for his outspoken nature, fell silent at those words alone.
The oppressive atmosphere left no room for movement; even the sound of breathing was stifled.
Yet the Golden Pope alone clasped his white fingers together in front of his face with an elegant gesture. "For the very beginning of a turning point in history, it's a small move."
"But if father and son meet... it will begin."
Not a single person could bring themselves to speak.
The silence continued, yet groans swirled within the Popes' hearts.
Breaking that silence, the Golden Pope swallowed his anguish and made a decision. "...I will open my papal line. We must make contact. It's not too late, even now. Assign a watcher to Justice."
But the Rainbow Pope quietly waved her hand to silence him. "There is no need for that, Golden Pope. He has already... met Justice."

The Golden Pope's deeply chiseled features honestly betrayed his surprise. "Do you know who I am referring to?"
"I do not know either... but if it is the subordinate you once trusted most, then I do." At the Rainbow Pope's words, the other Popes were struck by yet another wave of astonishment.
Over the past few years, not a single Pope had forgotten him.
The Golden Pope let out a sigh, as if in surrender. "No, it is indeed the same man. He isn't here now, but... I always believed he would take that seat... it's him." In a resigned voice, the Golden Pope pointed to a corner of the round table.
Eleven Popes were seated at the twelve chairs that had been prepared.
The single empty seat had continued to wait for him, but that hope had vanished in vain.

"Auntie, I want seconds of the river shrimp stir-fried with black ginger!"
"Coming right up! Just a sec!"
"Hey, is my stew ready yet?"
"Okay, okay, I'm bringing it right now!"
Inside the cramped shop, thirteen children were devouring their meals one after another. The sign hanging over the door of the only diner, tavern, and inn in Wilder Village read "Jimka's Kitchen."
As the name suggests, the landlady, Jimka, was serving her signature dishes to Regios and the children. "Here you go, Regios, a second helping."
"Oh, thanks. Come on, dig in. Anna, you have to eat your vegetables."
"But I hate vegetables."
"You won't become a beauty if you don't eat your veggies.
"That's what my grandma used to say."
"And Voltas, you're just eating meat all the time... Ah, Chris, don't force yourself to eat."
"I know, Regios." Chris, who had been resting just a moment ago, was now eating with everyone else.
Regios kept an eye on each of the children as he tore off a piece of grilled chicken for himself. Watching the commotion at the table, Riot sipped his post-meal Guiana coffee.
"Do you eat dinner here every night?"
"No, just sometimes. Usually I cook." Regios took a sip of cold Tete tea and wiped the corners of the mouth of a girl named Anna. "I'll have to introduce you all to the villagers. If you stay here for a night and eat, you'll get to meet all the important people in the village."
Indeed, villagers were coming and going from the shop one after another.
Even now, at the next table, Old Man Rossi, who served as the village chief, was puffing on a hookah. "They're your guests, Regios. Everyone will welcome them."
"Thank you, Mr. Rossi." Justice, having changed into his sacred robes, bowed before the Edna pudding dessert. "I'll be staying here until my injuries heal."
"Take your time getting better, Holy Officer." He was an old man with a gentle smile. But he, and the cheerful Jimka, had once been refugees themselves. Yet their smiles gave no hint of their painful past.

(Maybe it's because of this place.) Riot thought to herself as she took a sip of coffee. It seemed that even deep emotional scars would eventually fade away if one lived in this village.

"Um, mister Regios..." Justice, without touching his Edna Pudding, addressed the white-haired man. "Please tell me... It was you who saved Riot and me, wasn't it?"

Regios didn't answer, instead staring intently at the children.

Still, Justice repeated his question. "I'm so grateful. But... why did you save us?"

"I went to that inn town by carriage to stock up on supplies. And by chance, I found you two..."

"Oh, I'm sorry. That wasn't the right question... Um, how did you save us?"

Riot shot a sidelong glance at Regios, who remained silent.

Justice persistently repeated his question. "There were four Evil Gods in that village. If you defeated them, then you must have..."

"Let's not get into complicated stuff during dinner." He repeated the line he'd said so many times before. "You survived. Isn't that enough?"

"But, Mr. Rossi...?" Justice turned to look at the old man with a troubled expression.

But with his pipe still clenched between his teeth, the village chief shook his head. "This is a refugee village, Holy War Officer. It's an unspoken rule here not to pry into others' backgrounds." He exhaled a puff of white smoke and smiled contentedly. "You don't have to say what you don't want to say. That goes for you lot, too."

Feeling seen through, Riot flinched slightly.

The old man's gaze was fixed on her, as if cherishing her.

As if resigning herself to it, Riot downed her coffee in one gulp. "That's fine, Justice. I'm not in the mood for complicated talk either."

"Uh, yeah, I guess so, but..." Just as Justice trailed off, Jimka's hand reached across the table.

"Why are you all looking so gloomy? Maybe you should have a little drink?" With that, she slammed a bottle of wine down on the table. "It's a gift for you guys. It's a special bottle — goes for at least ten thousand dorks."

"What's so special about it? Isn't that the one I pulled out of that stagecoach that sank in the river the other day?" Regios glanced at the label on the bottle and laughed it off. "The cost was practically nothing anyway. You're just being dramatic."

"Shut up, Regios. It's all about the sentiment. Just accept it gratefully."

Justice's smile turned into a grimace as he gave Regios a sharp slap on the shoulder. "Uh, well, I'm not allowed to drink because of my vows..."

"Oh, right, the Holy Crusader boy. Well then, Regios and you... um... well..."

"Riot."

"Right, Riot. You two should just drink together. It'll definitely be great to watch." This time, she slapped Riot's back with gusto.

Riot nearly toppled over the table and frantically clung to her chair.

"H-hey, grandma, cut it out!"

"Do you think I'm joking? I'm dead serious, you know."

"But I just met this guy yesterday, and..." Seeing Riot shouting with her cheeks flushed, Regios couldn't stand it any longer and chimed in.

"Give her a break, Jimka. What's so fun about picking on a young girl?"
"Oh, come on, I'm only saying this for your own good."
"Like hell I am. It's just your excessive jealousy of teenagers and your own personal amusement."
"I mean, for a young man to stay single all this time in such a remote village — it's beyond pitiful, it's downright tragic. Day in and day out, taking care of thirteen people — look how rough my hands have gotten."
"Leave me alone. I'm doing this because I want to, so it's fine."
"There are tons of girls in the village who like you. You just ignore them usually."
"Huh, is that really true?" Seeing Justice nod in agreement, Jimka grimaced.
"They call you Regios the woman-hater... but it looks like you've finally woken up, bringing a girl home on your own. She's a good catch. Well done, well done." Jimka's lecture seemed to be business as usual; even the children stopped eating and listened intently to her voice.
"That's right, Regios, go get yourself a wife."
"Shut up, Riggs. Anna's just going to start mimicking you again."
"That's right, big bro, go find a girlfriend!"
"See? I told you so. I'm heading home first. Put the bill on my tab." Covering his ears, Regios stood up.
The kids hurriedly wiped their mouths and scampered out.
"Big bro, I'm coming home with you too!"
"I'm going home too! Thanks for the meal, Auntie!"
"Alright, come back again," Jimka said, waving back at them.
Justice and Riot also slowly leave the shop.
"Well then, we'll be staying with you for a while, Mr. Rossi." While Justice bid farewell to the old man, Riot stepped outside.
Under the starless night sky, the night breeze blew coldly against the Battle Armor Demon's skin.
Surrounded by the children, Regios had already begun climbing the hillside. His profile as he picked up each of the playful children one by one looked just like that of a young boy. But still...
(He doesn't reveal his true nature. Even when asked, he slips away.) Riot brushed her bangs back, which had been ruffled by the wind. (It's not like I need to know, but...)
She definitely couldn't help but wonder. This was the first time she'd ever been with someone who made her feel this way. Why was that...?
"That man... Regios, everyone really does look up to him, huh?" Just then, Justice, who had caught up to her, spoke up. "It's just like a real family. Don't you feel a little jealous?"
Without looking away, Riot replied in a weary voice. "I've lived all my life alone. I don't want a family now, of all times."
"Is that so? I think you and mister Regios would make a great couple, though."
At those words, Riot couldn't help but burst out laughing. "Are you serious? We just met yesterday. How do you even know we're a good match?"

"Hmm, just a hunch."
"Don't decide who my boyfriend is based on a hunch."
"But, I don't know Regios, but I think I know you pretty well. I just thought... someone like him would be good for you."
With an exasperated look, Riot shrugged her shoulders. "I have no intention of becoming part of his family. Suddenly becoming a mother to thirteen kids... Besides, I'm already having a hard enough time taking care of you alone." Riot lightly tapped Justice's forehead with her fingertip.
But Justice looked up at Riot with a serious expression. "So, Riot... what kind of guy do you like? What kind of person do you fall for?"
Suddenly, Riot felt as if the very core of her being had trembled.
(The kind of person I'd fall for...?)
In that instant, countless scenes flashed through her mind. Making breakfast for someone, sewing clothes for someone. Soothing a child, raising them, watching them grow, and growing old together. After catching a glimpse of what should be a long life played in fast forward...
"You're such a fool, Justice." Riot let out a dismissive laugh. "I'm a Battle Armor Demon. You haven't forgotten that, have you?" With that, she set off after Regios and the others, without even glancing back at Justice, whom she'd left behind.
So he wouldn't see the tears she'd shed.

"So, what do you plan to do?" The Demon King looked down at the Blood Pact Member. "You still can't make a move while Regios is around, huh?"
"That won't do. As time passes, their vigilance and unity will only grow stronger." The Blood Pact Member summoned an image Regios from a rift in space-time. "A head-on assault has its limits. We'll attack them from the flanks."
"You mean to trap Regios? Ridiculous. He's already been..."
But the Blood Pact Member, keeping his gaze fixed on Regios, cut off the Demon King's thoughts.
"That is precisely why he seeks someone he can trust. Someone who will not betray him. That is why he is gathering children."
There were the cheerful smiles of children.
The Demon King, too, focused his thoughts, and as soon as he spotted his target, a twisted grin flashed across his face. "I see. Is there a weakness in that desire?" The Demon King sent a powerful thought toward the soul he had chosen as his target.
"What a foolish man. Even children are not pure and innocent. They are human too. Some harbor intense desires. Even among these..."
The Blood Pact member nodded contentedly. "We must separate Justice from Regios by any means necessary. I leave the methods of doing so to you, Your Majesty, the Demon King."
As if to confirm his understanding, the Demon King intensified his thoughts.
Thoughts born of twisted desire, known as temptation.

【Chapter 2: Wilder Village / Doubt】

Even before the morning sun streamed through the window, the sound of children's footsteps began to echo outside the room.

Riot got out of bed, brushed her bangs aside, and swallowed a yawn. She tiptoed out of the room, careful not to wake Justice, who was sleeping on the sofa. "Huh? They're up early. Whoa..."

Regios was already in the kitchen, heating a frying pan on the stove. All around him, the children were shedding their pajamas and slipping into their work clothes one after another.

"Good morning, Riot."

"Good morning, big sister. I'm going to clean the cow shed now!"

Smiling at Anna, who spoke proudly, Riot stretched her arms wide. "You're so responsible... Still, you guys sure are up early."

"That's just how mornings go on a farm." Regios tossed some bacon into the frying pan and began preparing the bread.

It seemed this wasn't breakfast, but rather a light meal before work. There wasn't a trace of tension in Regios's back as he bustled about the kitchen... or so it seemed. But Riot could tell he was still giving off a subtle sense of wariness.

(Do I really seem that untrustworthy?) A clear sense of irritation began to grow deep within her heart.

But shaking it off, Riot stepped forward naturally. "...Want me to help with something?"

"Sorry about that. Then make me a sandwich. She'll be a pain if I don't feed her something first."

"But this is hard work, you know." Smiling, Riggs brought over a basket of vegetables.

Riot picked out some red lettuce and small tomatoes from the basket, then cut them into bite-sized pieces with practiced ease.

"Wow, you're fast. You're a great cook, big sis." Sheena, the older girl, said admiringly.

Riot could only give a wry smile. "I'm just cutting them up. I've been cooking for myself the whole time we've been traveling. I'm just used to it." It was the first time she'd ever been praised for something like that. Desperately holding back a shy smile, she sliced the bread and began stuffing it with the vegetables.

Just then, Regios suddenly called out. "Hey, catch." She turned around to see a folded white apron flying toward her. "You don't want to get your clothes dirty, do you? Put it on." With that, he turned back to the frying pan.

Riot compared the brand-new apron to her own dirty leather armor. The stark contrast between the apron's whiteness and the armor, which reeked of blood, was too great.

Even imagining himself wearing it in this kitchen felt strangely out of place - but she took the plunge and put it on. She decided to say nothing more and immerse himself in the cooking. However, Sheena and the other girls couldn't help but let out a cheer at the sight.

"Riot, it suits you!"

"Hmm, I guess so."

"You're such a fool. This would look good on anyone."
"No, it's way better than wearing armor. Right, Regios?"
While wrestling with a piece of bacon, Regios gave a slight nod. She nudged him in the side with her elbow and grinned.
"Oh, come on, you're blushing again! You really want a lady like this, don't you?"
"Hey, hey, you, don't say such silly things."
"What? You don't like Regios, big sis?" Chris also peered at Riot's face with a mischievous smile.
Hurriedly lowering his gaze, Riot roughly pulled the next red lettuce toward him. "I-I don't really...." Flustered, she swung the knife down. And just like that, the blade sliced cleanly through Riot's fingertip.
Anna, who had been watching the scene up close, widened her eyes in shock. "Riot, are you okay?"
"I-I'm fine, don't worry."
Perhaps sensing the awkwardness in her voice, Regios turned his head slightly.
Riot was simply staring at her fingertip. The slashed artificial skin exposed the wound. Yet not a single drop of blood seeped out from it. She felt no pain. "Big Sis, isn't any blood coming out?"
Anna asked again. "Big sis, that's weird! Why isn't there any blood?"
"You idiot, Anna! Don't say things like that!" Chris hurriedly covered her mouth.
Both Riggs and Sheena stopped what they were doing and kept staring at Riot's fingertips.
But Riot suddenly flashed a smile. "That's right, isn't it amazing? I don't bleed at all, you know." She stood there calmly, chest puffed out, right in front of a stunned Anna. "My whole body is made of machinery. You're jealous, aren't you?"
"Whoa, big sis, you're so cool!"
"I know, right? This nice body is custom-made. Though, come to think of it, maybe my chest could've been a little bigger... just kidding." As she laughed... distant memories began swirling frantically through her mind.
(You're not human, are you?)
(You're a Battle Armor Demon, aren't you?)
(You're just pretending to be human!)
She wanted to scream at the top of her lungs and run away from there.
But Regios's hand lightly touched her back. "Don't be stubborn when it hurts." Regios removed the frying pan from the heat and smiled at Riot.
Suddenly, all the wariness that had been there vanished from his expression in an instant.
Taking Riot's startled hand, Regios kissed the wound on her fingertip. "W-what are you...!"
"To stop the bleeding."
"But I—"
"You looked like you were in pain." Smiling, he squeezed her hand tightly, as if to hide his true intentions. Regios's warmth spread from her fingertips deep into her chest.
Looking into those eyes that had known great sorrow, Riot felt her heart grow calm.
"Anna, I know. Mama kissed my sore spots, too."

"Ah, Riot is just like Anna. When it hurts, I get a kiss, too."
"I see. So you're just like me, big sister." Smiling at Regios, Anna nodded happily in agreement.
Riggs and the others began to move as if a spell had been broken.
"Well then, we're off."
"Yeah, be careful."
"Big sister, we're off!"
"Okay, have a good trip."
Riot watched the children leave. And the moment the last one stepped out of the house...

"What's wrong, Riot?"

Turning her back to Regios, she covered her face with her hands. "Th... thank you..." She whispered the words in a voice barely above a whisper. "Thank you... that's all..." She covered the tears that suddenly welled up with her hands.

She wasn't the type to cry like this. She repeated it to herself over and over, but the tears wouldn't stop. She never cried like this in front of Justice, so why were the tears flowing now? Why could she cry in front of Regios? She didn't understand it herself.

All she could do was tremble and let the tears stream down her face, unaware of Justice's gaze watching her from beyond the door.

Inside the barn were six well-built dairy cows. Young girls were milking them and collecting the milk in large metal cans. Riggs and the others carried them out one after another to be pasteurized. This morning, Justice was helping with the transport as well.

"Lord Justice, how's your leg injury?"

"Yeah, the swelling has gone down quite a bit." He smiled and replied to Matthew. "Besides, everyone else is working. It wouldn't be right for me to be the only one resting."

"You should just let us handle it." Sheena smiled at him as she milked the cow.

But the smile Justice returned this morning was awkward. He could feel his heart tightening. He knew it was because he had seen Riot's tears. "Here, take this... It's heavy, so be careful." He handed the can he'd brought over to Riggs, but his mind was elsewhere. He'd seen tears of frustration before. He remembered tears of joy, too.

But this was the first time he'd ever seen Riot's looking so sad. Those were tears she'd never shown Justice.

"That's all for today, Lord Justice. Thanks for your help."

"Ah, it's fine." He answered Riggs and snapped back to reality. It weighed on his mind, but there was no point in dwelling on it. Taking his Holy War Staff in hand to breathe in the fresh morning air, Justice stepped outside the barn. There, leaning against a large tree, a frail boy was coughing.

A girl named Lilon was rubbing his back. "Are you okay, Chris? Should I go get Regios?"

"It's okay, if I just rest a little... I'll be fine..." But there was no sign of his cough letting up.

"Chris, are you all right?" Justice called out and rushed over. Chris took a labored breath and turned around with a brave smile.

"Lord Justice..."

"Ah, Lord Justice, you're just in time." The sharp-witted Lilon let out a relieved smile. "Chris is feeling a little under the weather. I'll go get some medicine..."

"Got it. I'll stay with Chris." With an apology, Lilon dashed off toward the log cabin. Taking her place, Justice patted him on the back. "You're not feeling well, are you? You shouldn't push yourself."

"It's fine. I still have my morning chores to do." Coughing, Chris started to walk, but, staggering, immediately dropped to his knees.
"See? You're pushing yourself. You shouldn't do that..."
"But I still have to clean the stable."
"I'll take care of that for you. You go back home." Saying that, Justice tried to support Chris's body. He gently took his hand, intending to let him rest under a large tree. At that moment... "Chris, you..."
Even through the sleeve of his shirt, Chris's skin conveyed an unearthly sensation. Justice had seen tens of thousands of people whose bodies had been corrupted by magic. He had used miracles to purge away much of that corruption - but the sensation of Chris's skin spoke volumes about the extraordinary extent of the corruption.
"It's fine. Then..." Chris stood up, still staggering and clutching his head.
Justice dropped his Holy War Staff and held out both hands to support him. "Not in that condition..."
"It's fine! Leave me alone!" Startled by the sudden outburst, Justice jerked his hands back. But Chris seemed a little surprised by his own voice as well. "I'm... sorry."
"Don't worry about it. You really are a little tired, aren't you?" Justice sat Chris down at the base of a large tree and sat down himself. "You should rest. I promise no one will get mad at you."
"Yeah, no one gets mad at me. Never, ever." Chris lay down with a pained expression and finally began to breathe more easily. "Everyone's so considerate of me. Because of my body..."
"Everyone's worried about you. They care about you."
"But I hate it... It feels like I'm being treated too carefully, even though I'm just causing trouble..." He said this in a sorrowful voice. "I want to be more of a help to everyone... If only I didn't have this body..."
Justice stared at his hand as it stroked Chris. Chris's body had been ravaged by magic for many years now.
A low-level healing miracle might not be enough to cure him - but he wanted to ease his suffering, even just a little.
"Chris..." Right now, he had absolutely no confidence in his ability to use a miracle. The fear of the heretical mark appearing made his fingers stiffen. But Justice couldn't bear the thought of not using it out of fear. "Wait a moment, Chris. It might help a little."
He picked up the Holy War Staff from the ground and turned back - but just as he steeled himself to form the Holy Seal, Chris quietly stopped him.
"It's okay, Lord Justice. It's no use." Chris shook his head and smiled. "When we first met, Regios told me it wouldn't be cured by a miracle."
"Chris..."
"But he said that living in a place with clean water might make a little difference, so that's why I came here. "So, you don't have to use a miracle." Sitting up, Chris wiped the sweat from his forehead. Then, gazing at the house, he let out a sigh. "Riot is so lucky."
"Riot? Why?"

"Well, she has a mechanical body, doesn't she?" He asked that in an innocent voice. "If I had a mechanical body too, I could work much harder... I could keep up with everyone."
"That might be true. But if you really had a mechanical body..." As he began to speak, the image of Riot's back flashed through Justice's mind. That trembling back. Shaking it off, Justice regained his smile. "Don't think about that. Let's just take our time and heal your body."
"I'm jealous... I really am..." Chris said with a sigh. Then he smiled as if he had given up. "But there's no point in thinking about that, is there? Sorry for saying such strange things."
"It's okay. It's really okay."
All Justice could do was gently embrace that back. And then, suddenly...

"I shall bestow my power upon you... I shall bestow my body upon you... Power stronger than that man's... a body stronger than his... Then you shall attain a new life... In the name of the Eternal Blood Pact... Now..."

Justice stiffened suddenly. An indescribable chill crept up from his toes.
"What's wrong, Lord Justice?"
"No... Did you hear something just now?" Meeting Justice's wary gaze, Chris shook his head. "I don't hear anything. After all, there's no one else here but us."
"That's true, but..." Even as he spoke, Justice scanned the grassland. Just then, a small shadow darted into his field of vision from the distance. "Lord Justice!"
Riggs came trotting up from the foot of the hill.
"Oh, it's just you, Riggs..." Half-convinced, Justice waved to the boy.
Behind Riggs was a gaunt man in his thirties, dressed in peasant clothes. His already frightened face had turned even paler as he stared at Justice with a desperate look.
"It's Mr. Luxman. I wonder what's wrong — why is he here so early?" Chris also looked at the man with a puzzled expression.
Justice stood up and walked toward the villager. "Riggs, what's going on?"
"I'm sorry, Holy Crusader. I need you to come with me..." Cutting off his question, the man called Luxman spoke up. His blood-drained face clearly belonged to a man who had witnessed something terrifying.
"...Has something happened?"
"Not here. And we need to tell Regios and that Battle Armor Demon, too..."
At those words, Justice glanced back at the log cabin. The two of them hadn't come out of the house yet.

They say an elderly couple lives in that house, located in the center of the village. The simple wooden cabin looks perfectly ordinary from the outside. Except for the fact that the sound of an old woman wailing can be heard coming from inside.
"Well, take a look." Luxman, who had led the way, opened the door for Regios. Riot and Justice, following behind, immediately stepped inside. "Ugh..."

Justice groaned softly and gripped his Holy War Staff tightly. Riot and Regios stared silently at the bed in the room. Lying on it was the charred remains of a human body, blackened from head to toe. Though it was impossible to discern the person's features or age, there was no doubt this was the owner of the house.

"It's Old Man Rodon. He was fine just last night... The old lady found him this morning."

"The bed looks clean, huh." Riot calmly ran her hand over the sheets covering the body. "Not a single scorch mark. The old lady was... at the time..."

"She was sleeping in the bed next to him. She didn't hear a single scream. The only one capable of doing something like that is..." Luxman shifted his gaze hesitantly toward Justice.

The Holy War Officer glanced around the room and nodded slightly. "It must be the work of a Demon God or a Blood Pact member."

"So that's how it is, after all..." Just then, Old Man Rossi entered the room.

His eyes held a look of resignation, and his frail shoulders trembled slightly with each breath. "Mutant beasts may appear around here, but I've never seen a Demon God. The same goes for Blood Pact members. "I wonder what on earth their purpose was in attacking such a small village..." Riot turned to Regios, who hadn't spoken a word since earlier. "Hey, what do you think? Do you have any idea what's going on?"

"I suppose I do."

"So? What on earth is happening to this village..."

"I'm not sure I should be the one to say this." Regios leaned against the wall, scratching the back of his neck. Ever since this morning's incident, his guard had somehow completely dropped. Even so, a look of confusion now crossed his face.

Noticing this, Riot turned abruptly to look at Luxman.

"Well, yeah... there shouldn't be anything in this village that a Demon God would want. At most, just human blood and flesh. But that was only true until yesterday."

"You think Justice and I are the targets, don't you?"

"Don't take it the wrong way. But this happened right after you two arrived. I also heard from Regios that the Bazara inn was wiped out. I can't believe it's a coincidence."

Justice lowered his gaze without a word. He himself had no evidence to refute those words.

But Riot began to choose her words carefully, loud enough for the gathered villagers to hear. "It's not like we don't have a reason to be targeted. Justice has been on a pilgrimage for a long time... and has fought against Evil Spirits and Blood Pact members countless times. It wouldn't be surprising if someone held a grudge against him."

"Then..."

"I know. I'll leave. Even if this village gets attacked after we're gone... it'll probably be fine. Regios is here." Riot forced a smile at this man, whose true identity remained unknown. "You seem stronger than the two of us, don't you? It's okay to leave it to you, right?"

But Regios's face remained stiff as he cleared his throat.

"Luxman, if you have something to say, you should say it all."

"But..."
"It's fine. These two might take it even harder, but they won't hold a grudge against you."
Urged on, Luxman still hesitated.
As Riot furrowed her brow at the baffling conversation, Old Man Rossi stepped forward.
"In short, Riot... some of the villagers suspect that you lot might actually be Blood Pact members... That's basically it."
With a voice that sounded like a mix of jest and anguish, Riot turned back to the old man. "Never mind me, but Justice is a Holy Crusader. To call him a Blood Pact member is—"
"But we haven't actually seen a miracle..." Luxman spoke firmly, as if forcing the words out of his chest. "I hesitate to say this to a Holy Crusader, but if you could show us a miracle, I might be a little more convinced."
The villagers' gazes focused on Justice.
Riot also locked eyes with the boy. In both their memories, the nightmare from two days ago at the Bazara inn came vividly back to life. Back then, the Heretical Crest had appeared the very moment he tried to summon a miracle. If the miracle failed again and the Heretical Crest appeared, their doubts would become unshakable.
Justice bit his lip, wrestling with the fear in his heart. Then he nodded. "I understand. If you insist on it..."
"Jus..."
"Hey, hey, stop that. Are you planning to put the power of the God of Creation on display?" Regios's voice cut off Riot's protest in a deliberately theatrical manner. "Even Luxman isn't serious. Everyone's just scared. We just need to put their minds at ease. Right, Luxman?"
"W-well, I suppose so..."
Regios regained his smile and stepped toward Old Man Rossi. "We'll handle the enemy, the two of us. At least give these two a chance to fight."
"Are you saying you'll leave the two of them here in the village?"
"Justice's sprain hasn't healed yet. It'd be cruel to kick them out."
"What if someone else gets killed because of that?"
"I won't let that happen."
"Even so..."
"If that happens, I'll die too." Regios stated it matter-of-factly.
Riot was surprised, but he pressed on regardless.
"I'm sorry, but the only thing I can offer is my own life. Won't you accept that?" Though he maintained his smile, his voice carried a sharpness like a blade. It concealed an unshakable fighting spirit. That was how it seemed to Riot.
Taking in the tone of his voice, Old Man Rossi stroked his beard with his fingertips. "I'll leave it to you."
The villagers murmured briefly, but Rossi calmly quelled the commotion. "Anyway, take Rodon's body outside. We'll give him a proper burial."
"I'm sorry." Regios bowed slightly.
Justice and Riot, watching his back, had also made up their minds.

A cold wind had begun to blow on the hill where Regios lived. It should still be high in the day, but it felt like dusk. When they reached the log cabin creaking in the wind, Regios turned to look at the two behind him.

"Go back to the house first. I'm going to the barn." Squinting against the cold wind, he pressed on. "It's going to get cold this evening. We'd better go get some firewood."

Hearing Regios's words, Riot turned to look at her partner. Justice nodded and walked into the log cabin alone. Left behind, Riot hurried after Regios. "Wait, Regios."

"Hmm? What is it?"

"It's about what happened earlier..." The two faced each other inside the dimly lit barn. The smell of stacked charcoal and firewood was slightly pungent.

Riot began to speak, looking apologetic. "We're leaving this village."

"Hey, what do you mean by that...?"

"I'm sorry. We... we don't have the confidence to clear our names." Regios was clearly shaken by those words. But undeterred, Riot continued. "Thank you so much for giving us the chance to clear our names - but right now, we don't have the confidence to fight the Evil God."

"Is that because of Justice?"

"Yeah, I guess so." Riot could only hedge her answer.

No matter how many chances we're given to fight, if Justice collapses without ever using a miracle, the suspicions won't be cleared up at all. A Holy Warrior who can't use miracles... and if they see the heretical mark, there'll be no way to explain ourselves. "Even if we leave the village, the Evil God might still attack you guys. If that happens... I'm really sorry. You'll have to protect them. We just can't do it."

"But then you'll still be under suspicion."

"It's fine. There's nothing we can do about it."

Riot sighed and spoke with resignation.

"It's not the first time, after all. That's how people see us."

It was frustrating. What was the point of being a Battle Armor Demon? What was the point of this fighting power? But compared to Justice's suffering, it was nothing. Even though he was a Holy Warrior, he was abandoning the fight against the Evil God and leaving. It was an agonizing decision.

"Even if it's just you. If you fight the Evil God with me, surely everyone in the village will..."

"No. Justice has to fight and clear his name."

Riot immediately shook her head at Regios's suggestion. "It's better not to do anything half-hearted. Besides, even if only my name is cleared..."

She laughed bitterly and rejected the idea.

Besides, Riot knew. Making only Riot fight... There was no way Justice would allow that. He would surely throw himself into the battlefield too. That's the kind of partner he is.

"I'm leaving... tonight."

"Tonight...?"

"If we disappear, you might get blamed too." Riot looked up into Regios's eyes. "I'm truly sorry about that. If, by any chance..."

She started to speak, then choked on her words. Regios's eyes flickered with sadness. He simply stared intently at Riot. "And you're not going to come back?"
"Well, not if I'm still under suspicion."
"I don't doubt you."
"Yeah, thanks. But... goodbye."
Suddenly, I felt an urge to run away from there. I bolted out of the barn and glanced back for just a moment. "It's better for both of us if I don't come back, right?"
With that, Riot ran toward the log cabin.
A sense of frustration welled up deep inside my chest. But I couldn't put it into words. That made it even more frustrating. I thought I'd made up my mind, but my resolve was starting to fade.
(Is this... Regret...?) Shaking her confused head from side to side, Riot opened the door to the log cabin.
"I'm home... wait, Justice?"
"Ah, Riot-" Inside the house, Justice was holding Anna, looking completely exhausted.
The girl in his arms was crying, her face bright red. "Nooo, don't go, Justice!"
At those words, Riot's heart skipped a beat. All around them, the gathered children looked anxious.
"I heard, Riot. About what happened in the village..." Riggs, who had stepped forward, also looked as if he were about to cry. "They suspected you all... but you're not going to leave this village, are you?"
"You're going to stay with us, right, big sis?" Lilon tugged at her sleeve, and Chris was biting his lip.
Looking around at their faces, Riot suddenly burst out laughing.
"Y-you're all so silly. We've been under suspicion this whole time — there's no way we're leaving."
"Really? You mean it, right?"
"Of course. If the Demon God shows up, Lord Justice will beat the crap out of it and take care of it. Right, Justice?"
"U-uh, yeah, I guess..." As the two locked eyes, everyone around them cheered.
Anna sniffled and looked up at Riot. "Is it really true, big sister?"
"Just believe me. Oh, look at all that snot running down your nose."
Riot pulled the girl into her arms from Justice's embrace and gently rocked her. "There, don't cry, don't cry. It's silly to cry so much, Anna."
"Okay, big sister, I love you." Anna pressed her snot-covered face against her.
Just then, the door opened, and Regios, carrying a bundle of firewood, returned home. "Riot..." He stood frozen in the doorway, looking strangely surprised.
Turning around, Riot lifted Anna up slightly. "Look, Anna. Regios is back. Don't cry anymore."
As if to forget the awkward atmosphere from a moment ago, Riot smiled.
But Regios just stared intently at Riot and Anna. "What's wrong, Regios?"
Lilon ran over, took the firewood, and smiled at Regios. "Riot is just like a mother to all of us, isn't she?"
"Uh... yeah, I guess so."

"Don't you wish you had a wife and daughter like this, too?"
"You're such a fool, Lilon."
Laughing, Riot headed toward the kitchen. "Alright, let's make lunch. Everyone, give me a hand." he children replied and followed behind her.
Justice smiled as well and helped carry the firewood.
Only Regios remained standing in the doorway.
"Ah, that's right." Suddenly, he muttered to himself, then he ran his hand through his white hair. "It really does seem that way..."
His tone sounded as if he had given up.

That night, after a somber day had passed in silence,
the back door of the Regios house swung open without a sound.
"Walk quietly, Riot," Justice warned in a hushed voice. "We can't have the kids waking up. They're all pretty sharp."
"You're the one who needs to watch your step. Your injury isn't healed yet, is it?"
Riot quietly closed the door behind herself, still carrying all their belongings on her back. The starless night of the New Continent completely concealed their figures.
With a forced smile, Riot whispered to her partner. "Normally, I'd use a healing miracle to fix my injuries and fight for the village. But this time, we're running away in the dead of night. I guess we have no choice."
"I guess we really don't."
"I'm sorry. It's my fault, isn't it?" As they quietly made their way down the hillside, Justice let out a sigh. "But I really can't use my miracle in this village. If I mess up, I'm sure I'll..."
"I always tell you this. It's not your fault, not this time either."
"But I wanted to stay in this village... in this house... a little longer. You feel the same way, don't you, Riot?"
"Hmm... I guess so."
"Don't you think we should at least say goodbye to Regios?" At those words, Riot looked back at his house. Even though she'd only been there a few days, a fierce wave of homesickness welled up in her chest. She felt there were so many things she wanted to ask, and so many things she wanted to say. But the Battle Armor Demon could only smile as if she had given up. "That wouldn't suit me. You know that."
"B-but..."
"It's fine. I don't have as many lingering feelings as you think I do."
Just as she said that and was about to take a step forward, "That's a shame." Suddenly, Regios's voice rang out from the darkness. Glancing up, they saw a knight with flowing white hair quietly climbing the hill. Regios, clad in white plate armor and with massive swords hanging from his hips, stood aloof and imposing before them.
"Regios, where have you been...?"
"On patrol. Around the village." As Riot's heart began to race, Regios pointed down below. "We can't have strange people coming in, and we can't have strange people leaving either."
"Regios, we were just..."

"Are you really planning to leave while still under suspicion?" Regios let out a sigh and looked straight into the Holy Officer's light blue eyes. "The position of Holy War Officer is one of great trust and responsibility. Do you intend to bring shame upon it?"

"No! B-but..."

"I know you have your reasons. But failing to explain them — isn't that a lack of effort? You can't claim to be fulfilling your duties."

Riot stood dumbfounded by Regios's tone, which was growing quietly intense. It wasn't just because he was wearing plate armor, but his resolute demeanor was reminiscent of a paladin - and a rather high-ranking one at that.

"You must have seen it too, Regios. My heretical crest." Plucking up his courage, Justice also revealed his secret. "It's only natural to be suspicious after seeing that. If anything, I'm the one who finds you puzzling. Knowing what you did... why did you help me?"

Riot, too, brushed back her red hair as it fluttered in the night breeze and asked, "Seriously, Regios... you've been on guard against us the whole time, haven't you?" In response to her question, Regios fixed his gaze squarely on Riot's eyes.

There was no longer any wariness or suspicion in that gaze. Only a cool, compassionate light flickered there. "I have children I must protect. I want you to understand that."

"Sure, I'm used to it." If she's used to it, why is she so irritated?

As Riot asked herself this, Regios replied. "But it wasn't just me who was on guard."

"What do you mean?"

"You were on guard too, weren't you?"

Hearing this, Riot pressed her lips together. Scenes from the past flooded her mind all at once. Before meeting Justice, after meeting Justice... She had met many people, but only a few had ended happily. "I trust people too easily... and I'm sorry, but I can't stand being betrayed."

At Riot's confession, the white-haired knight let out a slow sigh.

"At least let me clear up your doubts. I'll take care of your leg injury." Returning to his usual tone, he slowly formed a holy seal with his right hand. "First strike, Sacred Light Healing Array..."

"Regios, you..."

A white halo enveloped Justice's ankle, who was staring in astonishment. Regios, having summoned the miracle of healing, offered a bitter smile. "I don't use this very often. It might not be very effective." However, Justice, having received the miracle, could not hide his astonishment at its effect.

The pain and heat vanished from his ankle in an instant. Although Justice could perform the same miracle, summoning such a powerful effect instantly was an extremely difficult feat.

Regios changed his tone once more. "Justice, I believe in you all. I'm sure everyone else believes in you, too."

"Why do you trust us so much?" Justice looked straight at the white-haired knight and asked. "What if I... am not a person worthy of that trust...?"

"Justice, don't be ridiculous!" Riot grabbed her partner's arm, but Regios remained unfazed.

"You and Riot won't betray me. I know that."

"Regios..."

"I knew that from the moment I picked you up at the inn in Bazara." Finally, Regios spoke of that time. "Riot fought desperately to protect you. She was willing to sacrifice himself to keep you safe. Despite you being a Holy War Officer bearing the Heretical Mark... It struck me as strange. That desire to protect someone with the Heretical Mark... I believed there must be a reason for it - and that's why I helped you." He then turned his gaze toward Riot. "You're the first woman I've ever seen who would fight that hard for someone else. And even now... you're trying to leave this village without caring if it brings shame upon us. If someone like you were to betray us..." His words trailed off, and Regios looked up at the sky. "I wouldn't be able to trust anyone anymore."

Riot sensed the immense sorrow contained in that voice.

Regios's green eyes flickered as if he were choking back sobs. Those eyes turned toward Riot once more. "I hate it... I hate the thought of you all being suspected like this."

Riot was momentarily speechless.

But suddenly, a vivid red light flared up in the darkness of the night.

"The Metalite...!" Justice's Holy War Staff, which had sensed the magic and was glowing with a warning light, was blaring. But what he was pointing at wasn't his own staff — it was Regios's sword. Just like the Holy War Staff, the rare gem Metalite was embedded in the hilts of both swords.

As the three of them turned around simultaneously, a painful shock ran through their eardrums. "Ya, Na, Nios, Neos... Wildorn, Ya, Na, Neos..."

"Justice, get back!" Riot yanked her partner's body toward him.

A massive figure had appeared on the wind-swept pasture, incessantly repeating the evil incantation. It looked like a decaying human corpse that had risen from the ground - but it had three heads, their skulls half-exposed. It had six arms in total, their muscle tissue laid bare. Clutching long swords, axes, and curved blades in those arms, it emitted a menacing growl. Three decaying corpses clad in black armor emerged leisurely from a dimensional rift.

"The Demon Lord Neos Elgai." Before Riot could measure the released magical energy, Regios warned her. "Watch out, this is gonna be a tough one."

The moment he spoke, the Demon Lords leaped forward. With speed unimaginable for such massive bodies, they charged straight at them. Simultaneously, they fired a barrage of fireballs from their three mouths. The fireballs struck the ground around them, seemingly intended to immobilize Riot and his companions.

The flying debris and the impact caused Justice to instinctively drop to his knees. "Riot!"

"I'll buy you some time!" Shouting into the darkness, Riot drew the electromagnetic greatsword from her back. "Eyaaaaa!" Holding the greatsword horizontally, she slid into the Demon God's embrace. Trying to protect Justice, who had retreated to the rear, she faced the Demon God's slashing attack - but her retinas could only register afterimages of the Evil God's movements.

"I can't see it!" Panicking, she shifted the sword's angle and blocked the attack with the tip of her nose. But her opponent had six arms. Even a Battle Armor Demon couldn't block six blades at once.

"Ya, Na, Nios, Wildorn, Ya, Na, Neos..."

"There are just too many arms!" She shouted, then suddenly went limp in her grip on the greatsword.

As the Evil God, who had been pressing the blade against him, lost his balance, he seized the opening and reversed the blade's direction. The greatsword slipped past the Evil God's arms and forcefully struck at his throat.

Justice, seeing that strike, was certain of victory. "Gotcha!"

But the Demon God's movements far exceeded Riot's expectations - he swiftly blocked Riot's attacking blade with the armor on his arm.

"What kind of armor is this guy wearing?!" Riot threw her entire body weight into the blow, but the greatsword only sent sparks flying — it didn't penetrate the armor one bit. The Battle Armor Demon gritted her teeth at the enemy's cunning movements.

"How about this, then?!" Leaping backward, Riot swung his sword from side to side. The slashing strike instantly severed several of the Evil God's fingers on both hands. "Now you can't hold your sword!" Riot landed and licked her parched lips.

But the Evil God merely gazed at his hands with a smug expression. "Ya, Na, Nios, Wildorn, Ya, Na, Neos..." The severed fingers, along with the axe and sword he had been holding, fell to the ground. However, the fingers emitted steam and vanished, only to regenerate before her eyes from the stumps. Picking up the sword and axe with his new fingers, the Evil God readied his six weapons once more. His three faces wore ugly grins that could only be described as smug.

"Bastard!" He was forced into close-quarters combat with an agility unbecoming of his massive frame. His plate armor likely served to diminish the power of miracles and the holy copper Zodanium. The enemy was a demon of battle.

Having regained her composure, Riot scanned the area. The remaining two should be attacking Regios. His body moved reflexively to provide support.

But what Riot saw was the figure of a Demon God cowering in fear.

(No way...) Right before her eyes, the two Evil Spirits were slowly closing the distance between themselves and Regios.

There was no trace of a smug sneer on the enemies' faces. Tension radiated from their six arms. In contrast, Regios hadn't even laid a hand on his swords yet. He was simply gauging the distance to the Evil Spirits, trying to pinpoint that one decisive moment.

"Regios!" Justice formed a holy seal to offer support, but Regios, sensing his intent, stopped her.

"It's fine. There's no need for that." He stated this firmly, never taking his eyes off the Evil Spirits. "Protect Riot instead. I'm counting on you." As he spoke, the Evil Spirits leaped forward from both sides. With twelve arms, they brought down twelve weapons.

"Yana! Nios! Yana!"

Luring the Demon God right up to him, Regios exhaled a sharp, short breath. The moment he thought it, his form vanished suddenly.

Having lost their target, the Evil Spirits came to an abrupt halt. One sensed the danger and leapt backward. But the other, having misjudged the situation, frantically swiveled its three heads. And finally, it noticed Regios plummeting from the sky at breakneck speed.

"Ya! Na! Nios! Ya-na!"

"Second Strike! Underworld Magic Path Condemnation Fist!" A pale blue holy light surged from Regios's body like a tornado. Along with the swirling blast of light,

Regios's fist pierced the top of the Evil Spirit's head. It tore through the Evil Spirit's body, passing right through it and cleaving it in two. The light ripped apart the Evil Spirit's flesh, burning even its sturdy armor to ashes like scrap paper.

"Yaaaaaah! Yaaaaaah!" Emitting a death cry, the Evil God was burned by the holy light and began to melt away. Regios's holy light would not even allow the Evil God to regenerate. But as Regios landed, he turned to face the remaining two with a look of dissatisfaction.

"My skills have gotten rusty. To let one slip away..."

Riot was stunned by those words. (Was he planning to take out two at the same time...?)

But judging by the power Regios had unleashed, it didn't seem entirely impossible.

Justice, too, stared at Regios in disbelief.

"Holy War General..." And finally, his eyes realized Regios's true identity. Justice voiced his astonishment. "Regios, you are..."

The words he was about to speak were cut short by the screams of cattle and horses. They had gone mad, driven by the screams of the writhing demon god.

As if guided by the screams, several villagers finally ran over, torches in hand.

"Regios! W-what is this..."

"Don't come! Nobody come near!"

Old Man Rossi stood at the head of the crowd, and Luxman was among them. But lights were beginning to come on at the Regios residence as well, as people wondered what was happening.

Riggs and Chris threw open their windows, looking half-asleep. "What on earth is going on… AAAAAHHHHH!"

Riot hurriedly warned the boys. "No, stay inside! Don't come out!" But their warning came a split second too late; the two Evil Spirits had already activated a new power.

"Ya, Na, Nios, Wildorn, Ya, Na, Neos..." The Evil Spirits' rotting eyeballs flashed with an intense, momentary brilliance. A thudding pulse spread across the meadow, and as the wave engulfed everyone, the villagers' torches and the Regios family's lamps all lost their flame at once. The light vanished, and darkness swallowed the meadow.

"I shall show you... my power... I shall show you... my magic... You can change... You can attain a body far more wonderful than this... All I ask is a little... All I ask is a small sacrifice... Then you will... be able to surpass that man..."

"W-what the hell is this?!"

Ignoring the panicked voices of the villagers, Riot's cybernetic eye automatically activated its night vision. But nothing appeared in her field of vision. Neither the villagers nor the Demon God, nor Justice and Regios — who should have been right there—were visible.

"W-what is this... Justice!"

"I'm right here." A small hand gripped Riot's tightly. "This isn't just darkness. It must be a magical barrier."

"It's the Abyss of Vyrack. Human eyesight is useless here." Regios's voice came from right beside him. "Demon God's eyesight works just fine, however."

In an instant, a presence lunged at her from head-on. Riot readied her greatsword, bracing for the invisible enemy - but Regios dashed forward, standing in front of Riot, drawing long swords from his left and right hips.

A metallic clang echoes, and sparks fly through the darkness. With his arms crossed, Regios effortlessly blocked all six blades. Holy light crackles and bursts from the clashing blades.

"How come... you can see me?" Riot asks in a voice tinged with awe.

Regios shaked his head while locked in combat with the enemy before him. "I'm human too; I can't see you. It's just..."

The Evil Spirit roared right beside him. He drew his blade, aiming for Regios's body from a new angle. In that split second, Regios swung his swords left and right in a crisscrossing pattern.

"That's all I know." The Evil Spirit's scream overlapped with the whisper. Instantly, the invisible darkness vanished. The Evil Spirit, slashed in a cross by Regios, no longer had the strength to sustain the Abyss of Verac spell. It collapsed onto the meadow, scorched by the holy light of the blade, and then vanished into thin air.

The villagers, their vision restored, recoiled at the sight of the dying Evil Spirit before them.

"This thing... it's the one that killed Old Man Rodon..."

"What on earth..."

Even the children stared in stunned silence at the aloof figure of Regios.

"Big bro, you took down that Evil Spirit, right?"

"Yeah... I'm sure he did..."

"Amazing... You're amazing, Regios!"

Riggs and Chris clasped hands in joy. Voltus rubbed his sleepy eyes, while the older Sheena held the young Anna in her arms.

"Only one left, then." As he spoke, Regios sheathed his sword. Then he turned his gaze toward Justice. "I've revealed my true form. Now it's your turn to prove your strength."

Nodding, Justice stepped forward.

Riot gripped his arm tightly. "Justice, but..."

"It's fine. It's just business as usual." The boy stood face-to-face with the Demon God and quietly formed the Holy Seal. "Doubts can only be dispelled through action. I should be able to do this." Muttering as if in prayer, he thrust his Holy War Staff forward.

The last Demon crouched low, glaring at Justice, but suddenly changed direction. "Yana Nios! Yana!" Screaming in a strange voice, it leaped toward the Regios residence.

"Riggs! Chris!" At Riot's shout, the children closed the windows.

But the Evil Spirit let out a shriek and lunged forward, as if trying to smash through the window. "Ya! Nios! Yana!"

"Divine Inferno Strike!"

Without thinking, Riot clenched her fist and prayed that the God she usually neglected wouldn't abandon Justice now.

From the boy’s hand, a vast holy light erupted. Justice’s miracle manifested in the air as countless ancient sacred characters. The strings of characters, like chains, encircled the Evil Spirit’s body, halting its charge right before the house.

"Ya! Nanius! Ya-na!"

Justice hurled a voice filled with fighting spirit at the struggling, tormented Evil Spirit. "O bringer of calamity... Receive the judgment of the divine flame, and return to the eternal darkness of Kwa-Nacht...!"The strings of characters simultaneously unleashed a barrage of flames from point-blank range.

Before the children, before the villagers, the Evil Spirit’s physical form evaporated in a cloud of white smoke. "Justice!"

All that remained was the stillness of the night.Riot ran over to the boy and hugged his small body. With his face pressed against her ample bosom, Justice blushed bright red.

"Hey, wait a minute, Riot! This is embarrassing—everyone’s watching!"

"I knew it... you’re the best!" Ignoring Justice’s protests, Riot spun the boy around and around.

Regios clapped his hands lightly and flashed his usual smile. "Well done. Those last words were from Chapter Six of the Holy Scriptures, weren’t they? I’d long since forgotten them, though."

Riot snapped back to her senses at the praise and let go of Justice.

Justice turned to face Regios once more. "I didn't want to pry into your past, but it seems I simply cannot help myself. Now that I know your true identity... I must ask..."

"I am who I am. I have no identity to hide."

But Justice shook his head at those words. "May I ask, Holy War General Regios..." Justice’s voice was filled with deep reverence.

Riot, too, stared intently at the white-haired knight. Regios, in turn, fixed his gaze on the Battle Armor Demon with eyes filled with a sense of emptiness. The same light certainly shone in both of their eyes.

The people of the New Continent worship Aeolus, the sole creator god. Holy Knights exist to protect these holy believers. Holy War Officers exist to exterminate the hordes of Evil Spirits. The Holy War Officers and Holy Knights comprise the New Continent Crusade, and the New Continent Crusade was led and administered by the Council of the Twelve Popes. The Twelve Popes were all Holy War Officers and Holy Knights boasting exceptional combat abilities.

Each of the Twelve Popes had several subordinates under their command who possessed strength nearly equal to their own. Typically, they served as commanders of the Pope’s Regiment, but when a special order from the Pope was issued, they would undertake solo missions. Should anything happen to one of the Twelve Popes, a proxy Pope would be appointed from among them. It was these very individuals who were known as Holy War Generals.

"That’s right, Regios was also a Holy War General with a promising future." A black shadow looked down upon the man through a distortion in space-time. The Blood Pact Member of the Demon God Emperor followed Regios with his eyes, as if gazing upon something nostalgic. "He once served the Golden Pope as the commander of the First Battalion of the Papal Regiment. To us, he is a man to be despised, but to humanity, he was a man held in high regard."

The Demon God King, listening intently at his side, remained silent.

The Blood Pact member spread his arms wide and projected images from the past before the Demon King. "Your Majesty must surely be familiar with the pursuit battle of Nebela Taber."

There, Regios could be seen swinging his swords left and right, repelling every single one of the swarming demons. "When the Seventh Papal Regiment, led by the Golden Pope, fell into a trap, the Demon King Ga-Sour did a little dance. After all, it was a golden opportunity to annihilate three thousand Holy War Officers and Holy Knights — a force renowned for its prowess."

"Then, the fact that the pursuit ended in failure for Ga-Sour was..."

"It’s all thanks to Regios. Because of him alone, Ga-Sour’s forces were annihilated." Sighing, the Blood Pact member gazed intently at the footage of Regios. "He served as the rearguard all by himself to cover the retreating allies. All by himself."

"If not for that, Ga-Sour would be..."

"He would likely have been promoted to General-rank for slaying the Golden Pope." The Blood Pact member switched through the footage one after another. Each clip chronicled Regios’s valiant struggle. "He commanded the surprise attack on Onavik and was awarded the Sacred Cross Medal. He defended the Kieprak stronghold with just three men, and during the retreat, he carried his wounded comrades on his back and walked 200 kilometers across the frozen wasteland."

"That’s astonishing strength for a human."

"It’s not his strength that’s admirable. It’s his spirit." The Blood Pact member declared emphatically. "At Uranbal, he single-handedly rendered six High Priests of the Evil Spirit incapable of fighting. One could say the word "hero" was coined for that man."

"But now he’s just a farmer." The Evil Spirit King spoke, his gaze gradually filling with hatred. "Is that all it took — just that betrayal?"

"It seems that was enough for him to leave." The Blood Pact member smiled derisively and erased the hero’s figure. "Just the betrayal of a loved one..."

Justice gently opened the drawer of a small cabinet. It was the only piece of furniture in Regios’s private room. Inside, medals from the New Continent Crusade were packed tightly, leaving no gaps. He placed the one that shone most brilliantly onto his palm. "The Holy Cross of the Oak Leaves with Sword... There aren’t even thirty recipients in the entire New Continent Crusade."

"That was a long time ago." Saying this casually, Regios sank into the sofa.

Sitting down in the chair beside him, Riot twisted her mouth in displeasure. "Justice, you didn’t know the names of any famous people who’ve received that medal?"

"It can’t be helped. The names of the Holy War Generals aren’t made public." Justice reverently placed the medal back in the cabinet. "The Holy War Generals are candidates for future Popes. Their names mustn’t be known to the enemy, or they’ll become targets. Only those closest to them know." Saying this, he turned back to Regios. "But you, Regios, were supposed to be in line to succeed the Golden Pope. Why did..."

"...I messed up." After a long silence, he let out the words with a sigh. "I lost a lot of my men. And people who weren’t even my men... they all died because of me."

Hearing his flat tone, Riot recalled the words spoken earlier. (..."I won’t be able to trust anyone anymore"...) A sorrow that only those who have known betrayal and despair can utter. Riot, too, recalled her own past and nodded slightly. "Everyone makes mistakes."

Before he realized it, Regios had clenched both fists tightly. Riot stared intently at the fists turning white with regret. "And that’s why you’re here...?"

Silently, he pulled his glass closer. After downing the cold Tete tea, Regios turned to face Justice. "I don’t like to talk too much. Now it’s your turn. Tell me." The Holy War General pointed at Justice’s hand. "Why did you, a Holy War Officer, come to bear the emblem of the Evil Spirit Emperor?"

The boy folded his hands, forced a smile, and spoke. "I don’t know either. But..."

Riot turned her gaze out the window.

The long night showed no sign of ending. A thick, white fog shrouded the early dawn of the Eternal Plains.

Riot stepped out the back door of the house, parted the thick fog, and made her way toward the well.

In the end, it took the entire night for Justice to finish telling Regios everything.

Leaving Justice, who had fallen asleep from sheer exhaustion, as he was, Riot went out to breathe in the morning air.

(I’m going to leave this village.) She thought that as she drew up the cold well water. (Justice’s suspicions were cleared up after we defeated the Evil Spirit. What am I going to do if I stay here forever?) She had told herself this countless times already. Just as Justice had wished, she should return to the inn in Bazara and look for clues about his father - but the lump in her chest still wouldn’t go away, irritating her sleep-deprived mind.

As if to shatter her indecision, Riot splashed the cold water she’d drawn into a bucket onto her face.

"You sure are washing your face roughly." As soon as she heard the voice, Riot looked up. Regios tossed a towel toward her chest and rubbed his sleepy eyes.

"Wash yourself a little more carefully. You’re a girl, after all."

"Eh...?" Wiping her face, Riot stammered. Just like when she talked to Justice, the words wouldn’t come out. She ended up rubbing her face with the towel, as if irritated.

"I-it’s fine. I’m not exactly a big deal anyway."

"Is that so?"

"Huh?"

"Yeah. Besides, you hate women, don't you?" She wondered if she couldn't have come up with a kinder response.

But even in the face of her brusque tone, Regios' expression didn't change. "It's not that I hate women." He simply stared at Riot with detachment, then suddenly...

"I'm just afraid of them." Regios confessed in a resigned voice. Riot instinctively understood.

"You mean, the one who betrayed you was..."

"Yeah, a woman. Someone important... a woman."

Thick fog drifted between them. The morning chill brushed against his cheek. That coldness snapped Riot back to reality. "I-I see. Then, I..."

"I trust you. I told you that, didn't I?" Regios's voice, cutting her off, was strong and firm. "You fought so hard for Justice. You're not the type to betray others."

A sincere gaze. A straightforward conviction. Riot instinctively looked away.

"I just want to be with that kid," she said, her voice tinged with loneliness. "If I'm with him... I feel like I could fight. I have no hesitation about using this mechanical body. I can fight gladly."

"..."

"But if I'm separated from him, I'll just revert to being a mere Battle Armor Demon. I'll only fight for money."

"Justice is your..."

"Yes. He's my anchor." Riot told him honestly. "It's a selfish thing to say, though."

The only salvation granted to her grim life. If she hadn't met him, would death or corruption have awaited her? That's why she didn't want to let go. Even if it was a burden. Even if it was a selfish desire.

"You're strong." Saying that, Regios also lowered his gaze sadly. "You never showed your tears, even in front of the children."

Those words brought back the scene from yesterday morning. Tears she absolutely didn't want to show. Yet why did they fall then?

"My beloved wasn't like that." A tremor gradually crept into Regios's voice as well. "She couldn't become as strong as you... She was always crying because of me... And in the very end, she was defeated by her own desires. She was a kind girl, though..."

A kind girl... That way of speaking shook Riot to the core. (I can't hold back my rising emotions.)

"W-what's wrong with you? Is that why you can't trust women anymore? Don't say such pathetic things." Saying this, I gave Regios's chest a light tap. "You're a Holy War General, aren't you? Put the past behind you and move forward!"

"Wait... what did you say?"

She snapped and tried to head back inside. Regios forcefully pulled her arm back. "Are you really going to walk out after saying something like that?" Regios's voice pierced her very soul. The Holy War General gripped Riot's wrist and looked her straight in the eyes.

"Justice's injuries have healed, and the suspicions have been cleared. There's no reason for you two to stay in this village anymore. Come on. Are you really just going to disappear with your parting words being that?"

He had seen right through her. She was inexplicably afraid to meet Regios's green eyes.
"That hurts..."
"I'm sorry..." When Regios let go of her hand, a moment of silence fell between them.
"Really... I'm grateful..." With an unusually dry throat, Riot squeezed out the words. "But I have to go now. We have a mission to fulfill."
"Yeah, I know. I can't stop you." Regios ran a hand through his white hair, which was blowing in the wind, and let out a short sigh. "That's exactly why I'm in a bind."
"What do you mean?"
"You... could you stay here a little longer?" Faced with his earnest plea, Riot looked up at Regios in astonishment.
Then she suddenly burst out laughing. "What is it with you... I was wondering what you were going to say next..."
"Is it that strange that you're laughing?"
"It is strange. Do you even know what you're saying?" Riot pounded her chest emphatically. "I'm a Battle Armor Demon. What do you expect me to do in a backwater village like this?"
"You'll till the fields and take care of the animals and the children. It's obvious, isn't it?"
"That's what ordinary women do."
"Why don't you try living as an ordinary woman?" Regios asked her with a serious expression. "By my side..."
"Regios..."
"If it's with you, I could try again..." Suddenly, a breeze picked up.
The thick fog was carried down the hill, and the scenery below began to come into view. Riot gazed down at the green-filled plains and the peaceful morning in Wilder Village with a sigh of relief.
(An ordinary woman... an ordinary life...)
She had never even imagined it.
Eating with someone, working, living with children. She had been utterly convinced that such a scene could never be part of her life. But...
(I have my journey with Justice.) Even though she tried to speak, her lips wouldn't move.
Though the thick fog had cleared, her mind functioned as if shrouded in mist.
Riot, frozen stiff like a statue, tried desperately to force the words out. "I, I..." But the words were silenced. Regios's strong arms pulled her close.
Riot's face was pressed against Regios's chest, and her body was held tightly in his embrace. "I've heard about Justice's past. But I haven't heard about yours." Regios's voice seemed to resonate directly within her body.
"I don't intend to ask. But if you stay here, I'm sure your wounds will heal. Both yours and mine."
"But I... I..."
"The journey ahead is bound to be even harder." Silencing Riot's voice, Regios continued. "Being with Justice will carve even deeper wounds into your heart. Wounds that no woman by herself could bear."
At that prophecy, a chill ran down Riot's spine. "No way... You... What are you..."

"I don’t know everything either. But he will encounter despair. Can you endure that?"
Regios tightened his grip on Riot. "I don’t want to hurt you any more than this..."
"Regios, I..."
"We’re both covered in wounds. You and I..."
The wind surged up once more. The thinning fog blew back up from the bottom of the slope. Enveloped in that white darkness, Riot could do nothing but tremble.

"We’re both covered in wounds. You and I..." Regios’s powerful arms pulled Riot close. All Riot could do was tremble.

"Mmm... mmm..." Justice finally woke up on the sofa. He didn’t even remember when he’d fallen asleep. Looking at the sky outside the window, which was turning pale, he realized it was morning. "Huh... Riot...?" Stepping out of the room with sleepy eyes, he saw several children had already woken up in the dining hall - but they were all pressed up against the windows, secretly peeking outside.
"Good morning, Riggs, Chris..."
"Shhh!" Riggs turned around, put his index finger to his lips, and pulled Justice closer. "They’ll hear you, Lord Justice! We’re in the middle of something good right now!"
"Something good? Oh, well, this village is certainly a nice place..."

"Nooo! I mean the mood is great!"
Chris remained silent and pointed outside the window.
Justice crouched down and peered out through the window.

Thick fog blanketed the pasture, making the early morning mysteriously beautiful. And within that fog...

(Riot...) Justice saw a man and a woman embracing one another.

Riot was leaning her body against Regios' chest, and they were whispering to each other. For some reason, Riot's body looked slimmer and more delicate than usual. And more than ever, Riot looked much more grown-up.

"Are they... kissing?"

"No, Anna. But maybe they will eventually."

Chris nodded repeatedly, as if in agreement.

"So Riot really does like Regios, doesn't she? I mean, they've been... holding each other like that the whole time."
"I guess so..."
Justice stared at the scene in a daze.

The two of them weren't that far from the window. But for some reason, Riot seemed to be fading into the distance. A sense of emptiness, as if something had fallen out of her chest. Countless thoughts collided in her head, all coming to a halt at once. Then, suddenly, she snapped back to reality.

"N-no, you can't! Everyone's watching! Anna, look!"
"But I want to see more!"
Justice forcefully covered the girl's eyes.
Riggs let out a sigh and let a small smile escape.
"I wish big sis Riot could stay here with us."
"That's not possible, Riggs." The younger Chris said in a reproachful tone. "Riot is traveling with Lord Justice, after all."
"Oh, right..."
"Fighting is her job. She's not going to stay here forever."
"But if she stayed here, she could live happily with Regios, forever."
"That's true. Hey, what do you think, Lord Justice?"
Justice couldn't come up with an answer to the sudden question.
Seeing his bewildered expression, Riggs couldn't help but burst out laughing. "Lord Justice, are you maybe feeling a little jealous?"
"No... no, that's not it."
"What's jealousy? Hey, what is it?" Anna started making a fuss, and the argument continued.
But Justice was alone, mulling over the children's words over and over.
("So Riot really does like Regios, doesn't she?)
("But if she stayed here, she could live happily with Regios, forever.")
("But fighting is her job.")
Justice stood up and took the water pitcher from the table. He drained the glass of water and wiped his mouth.
Even so, his thirst wouldn't subside. Justice took several sips of water, as if to cool his mind, which had gone completely blank.
Was it only his throat that was parched?

【Chapter 3: Wilder Village / Parting】

"Well then, I'm off." Regios jumped onto the driver's seat of the small cart. "I'll be back after noon, as usual. I'm counting on you to watch the place."

"I know that." Among the children lined up, Riggs nodded. "Today's the day they buy milk, you know. I'll make sure to sell it all."

Regios nodded; his cart was also loaded with metal cans full of milk. It seemed going to the neighboring village to sell it was a regular occurrence.

Justice also went out with the children to see Regios off. "Please be careful, Regios." The young Holy War Officer called out in a slightly nervous voice. "If anything happens along the way..."

"Ah, I think I'll be fine... but more importantly, I'm counting on you to look after the village." Regios was smiling, but it was clear he was exhausted. He had fought last night and had barely slept before this morning.

Justice looked up at Regios, who showed not a trace of that fatigue, with a look of awe. "U-um..."

"Hmm? What is it?" Regios, holding the reins, turned around.

But Justice, who had called out to him, could only manage an awkward smile. "No, it's nothing. Be careful."

Regios stared at Justice in puzzlement. Just then...

"Hey, Regios! You idiot!" Shouting, Riot ran out of the house. She was wearing a white apron and carrying a small package in her hands.

"Who's an idiot? You're shouting so loud the whole village can hear you."

"Of course I'm shouting. Here, your lunch."

"Oh... I forgot about that."

"You're the one who asked me to make it. Make sure you eat it."

"Sorry about that. There aren't any places to eat in the village over there." Smiling, Regios took the lunchbox from Riot.

Riot also waved cheerfully. "Well then, be careful. Have a safe trip."

The wagon slowly descended the hill and made its way onto the small country road. Riot kept waving until the wagon disappeared from view.

"Hmm, that's so nice." Suddenly, Riggs shed some fake, tearful tears. "I'm so moved, Riot. You two look just like a picture-perfect newlywed couple."

"Yeah, yeah, 'Have a safe trip' and all that." As Matthew teased her, Riot's face turned red before her very eyes.

"I-Idiot! What are you talking about, you little brat!"

"Nope, you're really cute, big sis." Lilon gazed at Riot with a dreamy, girlish look of admiration.

Happy smiles overflowed on all the children's faces.

Trying to escape their gaze, Riot ripped off her apron. "This kind of thing suits Justice better! Right, Justice?" She said, then actually tossed it to him.

But Justice, who caught the apron, looked completely dazed for some reason. "Uh, yeah... um... so, am I supposed to wear this?"

"What kind of nonsense are you talking about? Geez."

The children burst into laughter at Justice’s dazed expression.
Justice smiled along with them, as if trying to cover something up.
"Well then, we’d better get the milk ready to sell."
"Got it. I’ll make lunch for you."
Smiling at the children scattering across the pasture, Riot turned back to her partner. "What are you going to do, Justice?"
"Hmm... I’ll help everyone, too." He nodded and started walking out onto the meadow.
Suddenly, a white apron slipped from his hand. He hurriedly picked it up. In that instant, a faint fragrance tickled Justice’s nose.
It was supposed to be Riot’s scent... But the fragrance seemed sweeter and gentler than usual — almost mature.
Just past noon, a covered wagon was parked in front of Jimka’s Kitchen. It belonged to a traveling merchant who regularly made the rounds of the pioneer villages in this region.
Jimka reached out to the white-haired old man sitting in the driver’s seat. "Long time no see, Old Man Willis. How have you been?"
"Ah, you look well too, Jimka."
"What do you have this month? Everyone’s been looking forward to it."
Villagers were already crowding around the covered wagon. The cart was loaded with food—vegetables, meat, and fruit harvested from other villages. He would sell those goods here, use the money to buy produce from Wilder Village, and then head out to sell it again.
The children of Regios had come down from the hill specifically to see Old Man Willis. "Grandpa, long time no see! Buy some milk from me today, too."
"Ah, Riggs, you look well. Sure thing. How about we trade for some meat?"
"And some candy, too! Anna brought milk, too!"
The children, clutching cans of milk, were mesmerized by the mountain of goods.
Justice and Riot, carrying their own purchases, followed behind them.
"Oh my, a new face. Hey now, those clothes... aren’t you a Holy War Officer?" Old Man Willis, noticing Justice’s sacred armor and holy staff, called out to him.
Justice bowed politely, looking a little embarrassed. The villagers, recognizing Justice, eagerly reached out to shake his hand.
"Lord Justice, thank you for driving away the Evil Spirit last night..."
"N-no... I’m just glad everyone is safe."
"We are truly grateful. In the name of the God of Creation, thank you." With that, Luxman pushed through the crowd and approached Riot. "Riot, I... I have something to say to you..."
Behind him stood several familiar faces from the village. They were all people who had once harbored doubts about Riot and Justice - but now, they all wore expressions of remorse.
"It’s fine now. It’s all over." Riot stacked the milk cans next to the covered wagon. "I’m just glad you believed in me... Grandpa, I’ll put them here!"
At that, Anna hopped up and down happily.
"Riot, you’re going to be Regios' wife!"

"Hey, Anna, what are you talking about?!"
"It’s true. Right, Anna?"
"Hey, Chris! You’re shouting too loud!"
"Is that so? Well, that’s wonderful news!"
Clapping his hands, Jimka began to cheer as well. "I knew it would turn out this way. You two make a perfect match, don’t you?"
"Stop it, Auntie. That’s not true."
"Eeeh? Big Sis, is that not true?" Anna pouted and tugged at Riot’s sleeve. "But you were kissing Big Bro!"
"Hey, hey, what kind of silly thing are you saying...!"
"Well done, Regios! He’s got it in him after all!"
At Jimka’s words, a chorus of congratulatory laughter erupted from the villagers.
Riot’s face turned bright red as he covered Anna’s mouth. "No, no, this kid... she doesn’t even know what a kiss means yet. Right, Anna?"
"Anna, I do know... gulp..."
"It’s okay if you don’t know! Hey, Justice, you say something too!"
Justice, who had been called out, smiled awkwardly. "Uh, y-yeah... um... what were we talking about again?"
"Come on, stop spacing out! Aren’t you getting swept up in this atmosphere too?" Exasperated, Riot released Anna.
Sitting down on the bench placed under the eaves of Jimka’s shop, Riot drew the pistol from her waist. "...Seriously, just because everyone’s bored and starved for conversation, I wish you’d cut me some slack. I have absolutely no idea how I’m a good match for that guy." She polished the pistol she’d taken out with her sleeve, while the children were engrossed in their shopping.
Justice approached Riot, clutching his Holy War Staff. "U-um..."
"W-what is it?"
"Riot... how much longer will you stay with me?" The young Holy War Officer spoke in a wistful tone.
"What's this now...?"
"I-I was just thinking out loud. Don’t worry about it, heh." Justice spoke with a forced smile.
The awkward atmosphere made Riot’s heart race.
"I’ll stay with you until your journey ends..."
"But... my journey is my own. It’s up to me to see it through." Justice bit his lip slightly before continuing. "I just started thinking... maybe I shouldn’t keep relying on you forever."
She hadn’t expected to hear those words. For some reason, Justice’s body looked bigger and more muscular than usual. And more than ever, he seemed much more grown-up.
(Why... is he saying that...) Riot looked away from him without knowing why. She gazed aimlessly at the villagers gathering around the covered wagon. Then, her eyes fell on a couple holding a baby. The young couple stood close together, soothing their fussy infant. For a moment, she imagined herself and Regios in their place - but

she desperately shook off the fantasy. (It’s... impossible for me... Even if I wish for it... I’ll never get it...)

She should have known the sorrow of a mechanical body long ago. Yet, something welled up in the back of her throat. As if to mask it, Riot forced herself to speak. "Justice, I—"

Just as she began to speak...

"I’ll show you... my power... I’ll show you... my magic... You can change... You can attain a life far more wonderful than this... All you need is a tiny wish... All you need is to offer a tiny sacrifice... Then you..... will be able to surpass that man..."

A dull red light shone upon Riot’s face. Justice, too, looked up at his Holy War Staff in shock. He turned toward the covered wagon and shouted a warning to the villagers.

"It’s a Demon God!"

"Everyone, run!"

For a moment, everyone stared at the two of them in disbelief. But as the ground rumbled and the houses began to shake violently, panic spread in an instant.

"Help me!"

"Chris! Bring Anna over here!" Riggs gathered the children and took cover under the eaves of Jimka’s shop.

On the trembling ground, the villagers scrambled to escape, crawling along the ground.

Only Riot and Justice had boldly dashed out into the middle of the street.

"They’re coming, Riot!"

"W-where from?"

"I don’t know, but..."

Their eyes darted about, searching for the enemy. As if mocking them, the Dark God finally spoke in a low voice.

"Ilrue... Lurii... Il Hajielalyeee..." The sky above Riot suddenly began to warp into a circular shape.

From that distortion of space-time, a woman with silver hair standing on end emerged with an air of composure. She was clad in gleaming silver armor, gripping a curved battleaxe in her right hand and a longsword with a thick blade in her left. Her majestic, dignified appearance was reminiscent of a goddess. If only six arthropod limbs hadn’t been sprouting from her back. If only her ample breasts weren’t breathing skeletons. If the double rows of fangs visible from her lips weren’t there.

"Emission Magic Power Level 720..." Riot groaned and instinctively stumbled backward. "A General-rank...!" The moment she realized this, the enemy released an invisible wave.

The atmosphere trembled, and space warped violently. By the time she sensed it, the surrounding buildings had already been torn from the ground. They were blown away with a deafening roar, scattering into dust.

Justice clutched his chest. Riot and Justice’s bodies were also hurled into the air and slammed down onto the ground with full force. "Hah!"

Countless warning indicators lit up on Riot's retinas as well. "Critical malfunction in auto-aim function. Reactor output reduced to 40 percent"

Despite this, Riot sat up and drew the greatsword from her back. Then she was stunned. "Gah...!" The scenery around her had completely changed.

The row of houses in the small village had vanished, transformed into a vast wasteland. A crater had formed in the ground, centered on the Demon General, and not a single blade of grass or tree remained within it. All from a single attack — one that, for the Demon General, was merely a practice shot.

"Anna, are you okay?!" Riggs crawled desperately out from the rubble of the houses, blood streaming from his forehead. In his arms, he held two young girls: Anna and Sheena.

"Big brother, it hurts, it hurts..."

"Hang in there. It'll be over soon, it'll be over soon."

Pulling the children close, Riggs stared at the silver Demon General with trembling eyes.

"...Amazing... That was the power of a Demon General..."

"Yeah, it's incredible... such incredible power..." Chris, too, watched the scene in stunned silence.

In front of the children, Riot finally began to rise to her feet. "This bitch...!" Riot ground her back teeth violently.

All around, villagers who had taken the full brunt of the shockwave were crying out in agony. Those trapped beneath the collapsed houses were submerged in a sea of blood. Just moments ago, this had been a peaceful village. If she and Justice were the ones targeted... she wouldn't be able to face the dead.

"Ilrue... Rurii... Il Haj... El... Alieee..."

She fixed the Demon General with a gaze filled with fury. Riot pulled out her prosthetic arm and loaded a magazine into the small gatling gun on her arm. "If you're going to target anyone, target only us!"

A barrage of 5.56 Millizodanium rounds was fired in full-auto mode. The bullets should have swarmed and embedded themselves diagonally into the Demon General's body, but the silver-haired Evil Spirit simply held the longsword in her left hand before her body. The blade glowed dully, instantly creating a circular warp in space. The gunfire, sucked into the warped space, vanished without a trace.

"Just because you're a Demon General doesn't mean...!" She shouted, then scattered a barrage of fire grenades. As they exploded around the Demon General, they sent up a massive wall of flames and billowed black smoke. She didn't expect it to work. There was no chance of winning in a one-on-one fight against a Demon General. But Justice was still groaning in agony. At the very least, until he could get back on his feet, he had no choice but to draw the Demon General's attention.

"Ilrue... Lurii... Il Haj... El... Alieee..." At the sound of his voice, the Demon General gripped her decapitation axe and longsword in a reverse grip. She slowly spun the weapons in her hands like a windmill. The movement was so graceful it was mesmerizing, but the circle she traced gradually began to glow gold.

Realizing she was the target, Riot leapt sideways. "Don’t let it hit me..!" Her words trailed off there. From the circle drawn by the Demon General, countless bolts of lightning suddenly surged backward, writhing as they went.

The whips of lightning struck Riot’s knee, slammed into her shoulder, and sank into her solar plexus. "Gah...!" A scream that didn’t sound like a scream escaped from Riot’s lips. Every nerve in her body screamed, and her retinas were flooded with warning signals. Her synthetic skin tore, and cellular tissue was blown away.

In an instant, her entire body was sliced open, and Riot collapsed onto the ground.

"Riot!" Riggs screamed, still holding Anna in his arms.

At that voice, Justice lifted his numb head. "Where... where are you, Riot..." But Riot was completely unable to respond.

Perhaps because her entire nervous system was damaged, she felt no pain at all. Instead, she had absolutely no sensation in her limbs, making it impossible to move. She didn’t even know if her arms and legs were still attached to her body. All she could do was look up at the Silver Demon General, whose heavy breathing echoed around her.

(I’m no match for it...) She had known it from the start, but the gap in their strength was simply too great. The Demon General hadn’t moved a single step.

It likely didn’t even need to advance to kill a mere human — no, a mere Battle Armor Demon.

"This is power... This is that body... Much stronger than that man... You can change... You can acquire this magnificent power and body..."

"All I have to do is wish for it just a little... All I have to do is offer a small sacrifice..."

Riggs stared at the battlefield in fury.

Riot lay fallen, and Justice showed no signs of getting back up.

"Chris, I’m counting on you to look after Anna and the others."

"Where are you going?"

"I’m going to call Brother Regios. It’s about time he came back; he must be nearby." With that, Riggs stood up from behind the rubble.

Chris grabbed his arm forcefully. "It’s impossible! You saw it! A human stands no chance! Even Brother Regios can’t do it!"

"Regios can win! He’s a Holy War General, isn’t he!" Riggs dashed out onto the street, heading toward the edge of the village.

"Ilrue... Lurii... Il... Hajiel, Alieee..."

Riot forced her gaze upward, writhing in agony. The Demon General’s target had shifted from Riot to a point far behind him. There, she saw Riggs sprinting down the street at full speed. "Riggs, hide! Don’t do this!"

But the boy kept running desperately toward the road leading out of the village. The Demon General let out a sharp growl, as if it’d spotted an annoying insect. Instantly, a magical spear shot out from between her fangs. The jet-black tip closed in rapidly on Riggs’s back as he ran.

"Get down, Riggs! First strike!" Justice summoned a miracle using the holy seal he had finally formed. "Circumventing Impact Bullet!" A flash of lightning shot from Justice's hand, intercepting the magic spear to block its path.They collided, and the forces of the miracle and the magic blast flew apart, but undeterred by the successive impacts of the miracle, the magic blast reached Riggs's shoulder.

"Gwaaah!" Riggs turned around and collapsed to the ground.

Just as Justice clenched his fist and Riot stood frozen in shock... "Third Strike! Holy Heaven Sealing Gate!" As soon as the summoning cry rang out, the magic exploded right before its target.

Before the trembling Riggs, a defensive miracle unfolded, taking the shape of a pale blue gate. The man who had summoned that miracle stood guard over Riggs, facing the Demon General.

"Sorry, Riggs. I'm late." Regios lowered his eyes and squeezed out a pained voice. "Let's rebuild the village... together again."

"Big brother..." It was as if he were averting his eyes from the tragedy.

The village had been so utterly transformed that it was too painful to look upon. But Regios, his eyes filled with rage and remorse, glared at the Demon General.

"You're the Demon General Haj-Elie, aren't you?" He took a step closer to the enemy standing at the center of the crater. "You're supposed to be a servant of the Demon King Nmul-Tatura... Is this his doing as well?"

"Ilrue... Rurii... Iru... Haj-El... Al-Yieeeee..." The Demon General merely repeated the words. But perhaps it had sensed the power of Regios who had appeared. She spread her arms wide and began to crack her joints. Her armor writhed like a living creature, completely enveloping her entire body.

"Is that your answer?" In response, Regios formed a holy seal. Though he had swords sheathed at his hips, he was clad in nothing but peasant clothes.

"Regios, I'll—" Justice tried to help, using his staff to push himself up.

But Regios quietly stopped him. "It's fine. You stay by Riot's side."

"But fighting it alone is..."

"Right now, I'll fight him even if he's the Demon God Emperor." His voice was filled with fury. The villagers watching could feel Regios's fighting spirit crackling through the air. (Regios...)

Lilot gazed at the Holy War General as he lay sprawled on the ground. Regios, his Holy Sign glowing with a pale blue light, summoned a new miracle with a sorrow-filled expression.

"Fourth Strike... Activate Holy Steel Armor..." Countless bands of pale blue light erupted from the Holy Seal. The bands swirled around Regios's body and, in the blink of an eye, wrapped themselves around his flesh. Then the light vanished, and there, Regios's body was clad in golden armor. The breastplate, emblazoned with the banner of the Papal Regiment, was a symbol of his former status. Enveloped in the armor's radiance, Regios drew long swords from his left and right hips. The Holy War General closed the distance between himself and the Evil Spirit General with a sudden lunge.

"Who will win... Who is stronger...? Will you show me power stronger than him...? "

"Yes, I shall show you — in the name of the Demon King... Behold well the power I bestow upon you... That man is the reason your parents died... Because of that man, your body has been corrupted... For revenge, behold the power I bestow upon you..."

"Al-Yieeeee..." With a roar, the Demon General Haj-El-Yie spread the jointed limbs on her back wide. At that moment, the space surrounding her massive form shifted and warped. The Demon General, flashing a vicious grin, slipped into the distorted spacetime.

"..." Regios switched his two long swords to a reverse grip and stood completely still. He closed his eyes and steadied his breathing.

Suddenly, behind him, the Evil Spirit General appeared, tearing through the rift in space-time. "Arieeeee!" Wielding the weapons in both hands and using its six back appendages, it leaped at Regios's back.

But Regios merely shifted his body slightly to the side. Realizing the situation, he opened his eyes and shot a piercing glare down at his feet. "I have no intention of cutting through a shadow!" He shouted briefly and leaped into the air.

The figure of the Demon General attacking his back vanished as if swept away by the wind. In its place, the Demon General's physical form leaped up from the ground, trembling. "Aryeeeeeh!"

"Noooooo!"

Roars and shouts collided in the air. Regios's sword struck at the Demon General's chest, and the Demon General's decapitating axe swung down. As the Demon General aimed for Regios's carotid artery, Regios parried the blow with one of his swords. A aerial battle where the clanging of metal echoed through the air.

Eventually, as Regios swung his swords left and right, the Demon General landed behind him.

"Ilrururii... Il Hajiel, Aaargh..."

Regios, too, descended to the ground with composure, as if he had wings on his back. He exhaled quietly. It had been a deadly battle lasting barely a dozen seconds.

The villagers and children watched the duel between these two, both far transcending normal human capabilities, with bated breath. Both Riot and Justice could do nothing but watch the lightning-fast battle unfold. Even if they wanted to help, they couldn't get within striking distance.

(So this is the power of a Holy War General...) Just as Riot felt a sense of awe, she could hardly believe his eyes.

The Evil Spirit General's arms, which had just landed, were severed at the elbows and fell to the ground. As the arms — still clutching their weapons — emitted black steam and vanished, the Evil Spirit General let his fury show.

"Ilrue... Il Haj... Yie..."

"I'll ask you again. By whose command did you come here?" Regios stamped his foot on the scorched earth. "Bring your master here this very instant. I'll wipe him from this world with no trace left behind." It was a seething fury that dwarfed even that of the Demon General."

"He's definitely strong, but... But he can't beat Regios... He's much, much stronger..."

"We'll see about that. This isn't the end... Take a look..."

"Regios!" Startled by the sudden turn of events, Justice cried out instinctively. The Demon General, Haji Elie, had lunged at Regios head-on. Despite having lost both arms, the charge was so direct and reckless that even Justice could tell there was something behind it.

But Regios remained unflinching. He clashed his swords together forcefully in front of his face. "If it’s a trap, I’ll bite through it." He leaped and swung his blades mercilessly from all directions. The sword strikes sliced the Demon General clean in half, armor and all. Flesh tore apart, and a liquid-metal-like bodily fluid scattered around. But the fluid, gushing out with great force, spurted toward Regios as if it were a living creature.

"Tch...!" The fluid that splattered across Regios’s face dealt a painful blow to both his eyes.

As Regios staggered involuntarily, the severed Evil Spirit let out a cry of triumph. "Aluieeeet!" The body of the Evil Spirit, severed in two, melted as it sank into the earth. But her legs alone were brimming with vitality, and they slithered out, exposing her true form.

The small, black body supported by six legs resembled a caterpillar. However, from its mouth protruded fangs so sharp they seemed to pierce through its lips. The grotesque Evil Spirit leapt over Regios’s head and pounced on the villagers watching.

"Gyaaaaaah!" Someone screamed. Blood splattered. Having torn off a villager’s head, the Evil Spirit shook its legs frantically and began its rampage.

Regios bit his lip and turned his sightless eyes toward the direction of the scream. "You bastard!"

"Did you see that? That panic, that blunder... Even a Holy War General is, after all, human... a creature created to commit mistakes..."

"..."

"Your father and mother died because of his mistake... Even your own body has been corrupted by his mistake... Do you not find it foolish, human?.. Do you not find it foolish, those who repeat the same mistakes?.. Don’t you hate him?.. that man... That man, who continues to live in comfort, despite his sins... There is no reason for that man to exist in this world..."

"Stop right there, Regios! Second strike!" Justice summoned a miracle, fighting against his faltering body. "Underworld Temple Extreme Cold Wave!" Behind the Holy War Officer, the statue of a female knight with flowing golden hair materialized. Gripping a long spear in each hand, she projected a blindingly fast cold wave with a battle cry. A swarm of white-glowing miracle projectiles struck the Evil Spirit General.

The Demon God’s body froze instantly, growing heavy and pinned to the ground.

"Aaargh!" The Demon God smashed through the clinging ice, attempting to advance further. Its ravenous jaws were aimed at the trembling children.

"Help me! Regios! Help me!" Anna screamed in anguish as the Demon God closed in.

Chris stood frozen, staring at the Demon God before him.

"Run, Chris!" Justice forced out a hoarse cry.

But the boy couldn’t move a single step.

Regios, relying solely on his instincts, slashed at the Demon God from behind. "Hoooooh!" Regios’s slash cleaved the Demon God in two. The severed body began to melt into the earth with a sizzling sound.

"Big Bro Regios!" With tearful voices, Anna and Riggs rushed over to him.
Regios pulled Chris into his arms as well, and tears streamed from his eyes, which had not yet regained their sight. "I put you through a terrible ordeal... I'm sorry... I'm sorry..."
Justice also rushed over to Riot and helped her sit up. "Riot! Pull yourself together, Riot! Hey!"
"Justice... It's you... I'm glad..." With those words, the Battle Armor Demon lost consciousness, looking as though she had finally found peace.
In the midst of the devastated village, the warriors held the lives they had finally saved close to their chests. The villagers stood in a daze, torn between relief at having survived and grief at having lost their families.
There was only one person who remained calm.

"I want even greater power... Stronger power than that of Regios..."
The thought was asserted with hatred and contempt.
"If it were me, I wouldn't screw up... If it were me, I would defeat him..." He muttered those words over and over in his heart.
Beyond the barrier of dimensions, the swirling thoughts smiled softly.

Countless bonfires illuminated the dark night. On the hill overlooking Wilder Village, the Regios family still stood strong - but the small village below had been utterly devastated, reduced to scorched earth. Those who survived had pitched tents on the hill, huddling together to ward off the night dew.
Of course, Riggs, Anna, and the others were also fast asleep on the grass. Inside the Regios residence, the elderly and infants must be sleeping.
The bonfires had been burning for hours now, as if to support their fear.
"How is it looking?" Cutting through the darkness, Regios approached one of the bonfires.
At the foot of the hill, Riot lay sleeping, wrapped in a blanket. Justice gazed worriedly at the face of his partner, who had not yet regained consciousness. "Not yet. She might not wake up for a while."
"Is the damage that severe?"
"The external injuries aren't that bad... but I think the internal power core has probably shut down. It's happened before... And you, Regios, are your eyes okay now?"
Saying it was nothing serious, Regios also sat down on the grass. "Compared to Riot, it's not even a scratch."
Regios's body was still encased in golden armor. Justice gave a brave smile to Regios, who was laughing as he patted his chest.
"But I don't really understand... Riot's body."
"But I know plenty about other things. Or perhaps I should say I understand them." The two Apostles of God gazed at each other across the bonfire.
A moment of silence passed.
"Are you leaving?"

"I am." Justice answered the question immediately. "The Evil Spirit was clearly targeting us... no, targeting me. I can't stay in the village any longer."
"Are you returning to the inn in Bazara?"
"Yes, because it all started there." Saying this, Justice let out a sigh. He took off his hat and ran his fingers through his lustrous blond hair. "...I wish I'd left the village sooner!"
"I tried to stop you, too. I share the blame." Paying no heed to the sparks flying around him, Regios spoke in a strained voice. But on his profile, something heavier than mere fatigue cast a shadow. "I've lived a little longer than you. But the number of times I've messed up might be several times greater than yours. The number of people I've sacrificed, too."
"No, Regios, it's not like that..."
"I made a promise to Old Man Rossi. I wouldn't let anyone get killed." Regios ran his fingers through his white hair in frustration. "I broke that promise."
The night wind suddenly shifted direction, causing the bonfire to flare up as if fluttering.
Justice made up his mind and stood up. "Then, I'm going."
"Wait, right now? It's too dangerous."
"I'm aware of the danger. More than that, I don't want to drag anyone else into this."
"Are you going alone? What about Riot?"
At Regios's words, the young Holy War Officer looked down at his partner. Riot's sleeping face, covered in dust, looked peaceful.
"It's okay if I ask, right?"
"Does tou want to leave her behind...?"
"She'll be happier staying by your side, Regios." Cutting off the Holy General's words, Justice declared firmly.
"She's traveled with me all this time. She's put up with my selfishness for so long... but I can't do this anymore. I just can't."
"..."
"If she stays with me any longer, Riot will suffer even more. Enemies stronger than the Evil Spirit Generals will appear, targeting me. If that happens, Riot will..." Justice desperately held back the sobs welling up inside him and turned his back on Regios. Was the image of Riot's final moments playing in his mind? The Staff of the Holy War trembled slightly. "I'm sure even you, Regios, would agree that's for the best... wouldn't you?"
The white-haired man looked down at Riot beside him. "Riot would die for you." Regios stood up and forcefully pulled Justice toward him.
His aqua-blue eyes, fixed on her, shimmered and flickered in the light of the bonfire.
"You know that too, and you should be able to die for Riot as well. Then that's fine, isn't it? Just stay with her until the very end."
"Regios..."
"But is that really what you're afraid of?" Regios asked, his tone hardening. "It can't be. You're not afraid of Riot's death. Isn't it the fate that awaits you from here on out that you're afraid of?"
Justice caught his breath.

Regios continued speaking, paying no heed to the fear in his eyes. "You might cease to be who you are right now. You're starting to think that. The closer you get to the secret of the Heretical Crest engraved on your hand, the more you feel it. That's how you feel right now." He exhaled, his dry throat making a rasping sound. "You're afraid of what will become of you once you know the truth, and of what Riot will think of you..."

"I'm not afraid of any of that!" Justice gripped Regios's shoulders tightly. "No matter who I am, Riot will believe in me! If I don't have what it takes to be a Holy War Officer... then she'll kill me. She won't let anyone else lay a hand on me!"

"Then take her with you. After all, how can you say that without knowing the truth?" Regios spoke with a groan, his voice thick with anguish. "Your fate... might be even harsher than you can imagine. I don't want Riot to see that. It'll surely lead to a result that's too painful..."

At this heart-wrenching confession, Justice stared up at Regios in a daze. "Regios, you..."He shook his shoulder with all his might. "Do you know about me? Please tell me! You know something about my father, don't you?"

Regios looked down for a moment, as if resisting. But his eyes, filled with courage and intelligence, responded resolutely to Justice's plea.

"I don't know either. But... you might be the sacrifice." Regios uttered those painful words. "Sacrificing a blood relative as the price of a Blood Pact, and having the Heretical Mark engraved upon that person. It's a common practice."

"Are you saying Dad formed a Blood Pact with the Demon Emperor and used me as the sacrifice?" Justice calmly repeated the meaning of those words. "But I've been told that many times before. Even when I was summoned by His Holiness the Pope..."

"But have you ever stopped to think about why?" Regios's voice cut through the air sharply. "I understand your desire to trust your father. But think about it. When your father, Eisen, disappeared, 1.2 million citizens from the Twelve Cities vanished. His subordinates — the Holy Knights and Holy War Officers — also died. Even on your own body, that of his biological son, the mark of the Heretical Sect was engraved. What was it that Eisen desired so much that he went to such lengths? What was the power that Eisen sought?"

Justice could only look up at Regios, his lips trembling. Regios stared intently at Justice and asked forcefully. "Think. No one else could understand. As his own child, you should know. What was the power Eisen wanted? What does Eisen intend to do?"

"That is... that is..."

"If all you want is magic, a low-ranking Demon God would suffice. But the one we've sworn an oath of blood to is the Demon God Emperor — the one who banished the Creator God who fashioned the heavens and earth. A power capable of destroying a planet. What do you plan to do with that? What does he intend to do?" Regios continued to ask, as if in despair. "What is it you want so much that you'd give up everything? Tell me!"

Justice's teeth chattered loudly. The boy clung to Regios with trembling hands. "Regios, Dad... Dad... surely not..."

Their gazes locked, their thoughts intertwining.

But just then, a strangely loud yawn came from behind them.
"Ugh~, you guys are so noisy. I can’t sleep!" Chris sat up with a start and rubbed his eyes.
Riggs, Anna, and the others all woke up at once.
"I thought I’d finally fallen asleep... Aaaahhh..."
"Anna, I’m still sleepy."
At that, the two Holy Warriors pulled away from each other. Regios moved closer to Anna and laid her down on her back on the grass.
"I’m sorry. It’s okay... Don’t worry, just go to sleep."
"Big bro, I’m scared. I want to sleep near you."
"Okay. Close your eyes... That’s it, good girl. Sorry, Riggs and Chris."
Riggs flopped down on his side and mumbled his reply. "Big brother, you should go to sleep soon too... mm..."
Seeing Riggs fall asleep immediately, Regios let out a smile. But...
"Offer just a small sacrifice... Offer just a small sacrifice... Your wish will be granted now... Your revenge will be fulfilled now..."
Chris stood up and pointed at Justice. "Ahh, Lord Justice’s hand!" He shouted in an unnaturally loud voice, loud enough for the villagers around them to hear.
Startled by the blatant shock, Regios looked up. Justice, who had been pointed at, looked down at his own hand. And then, a distinct red Heretical Crest began to appear on the back of his hand.
"W-why now..."
"Justice, something’s—" Regios frantically searched for something to cover his hand.
But before he could, screams erupted from the crowd.
"It’s the Heretic Mark! That child—!"
"Run! He’s a Blood Oath-sworn!"
Panic spread in an instant. People, still reeling from the day’s tragedy, scrambled to flee down the hill. Bonfires were kicked over, and sleepers were jolted awake.
"Riggs, wake up! We have to run!" Chris called out to the children one after another.
"What the hell is going on...?"
"It’s a Blood Oath-sworn! Lord Justice... he was a Blood Oath-sworn!"
Riggs stared at Justice with a sleepy expression, then froze.
Sheena and Matthew hugged the weaker children and held hands.
Then, with Old Man Rossi leading the way, several people bravely stepped forward, weapons in hand. "Y-you... You are..."
Luxman, his anger plain to see, pointed his flintlock rifle at Justice. "So you were lying to us all along! You’re the one who killed everyone, aren’t you!"
"No, that’s not—"
"Regios, did you know about this?" Old Man Rossi, too, let his quiet fury show as he glared at the Holy War General. "Explain yourself. Depending on the circumstances, we might have to..."
Glares filled with anger and suspicion pierce him from those who had fled into the distance.

As the children look up anxiously, Regios fixes his gaze on Old Man Rossi. "No, don't lay a hand on Justice." With those words, he brushed aside everyone's stares. "I'll explain later. For now, let him go."
"Regios..." Bathed in the red glow, Justice clenched his staff. Unlike usual, even as the heretical mark appeared, his mind remained clear.
Regios nodded firmly at the boy. "Go to the inn at Bazara. The answer you seek might be there."
But Luxman pointed at Justice and shouted, "Kill him, Regios! Do you intend to side with a Blood Sworn?!"
"Stop it, big brother!" At the same moment, Riggs clung to Regios's waist. "Lord Justice is a good man. I believe in him!"
But Regios brushed his hand away and turned his green eyes toward the villagers. "I beg you. Please let me go."
He knelt down and bowed his head deeply. At this unexpected display, the villagers were left speechless. No one could resist the sight of the man who had once been a Holy War General pleading so earnestly. In the silent meadow, Justice also bowed his head deeply.
He raised his face and glanced at the sleeping profile of his partner. Then he said one last thing.
"Please take care of Riot..." He turned his back and ran off into the darkness.
No one cursed him, and not a single person followed.
The figure of Justice, the Holy War Officer, vanished into the night.
"Big bro... Hey, big bro..." Riggs called out to Regios with a worried expression.
But Regios remained silent, turning to look back at the children. The figure he was searching for was no longer to be found.
The other boy, too, had vanished from the village without a trace.

He stumbled on the rocky ground. His foot got caught in a hollow.
In the pitch-black darkness, Justice tried to make his way toward the road as if swimming. Ironically, relying solely on the light of his own Heretical Crest, he crossed the pasture.
"Ugh!" This time, he slipped on the dirt. Thrown into the grass, a sob suddenly welled up in the back of his throat.
Was it because he was frustrated? Because he was sad? Because he was lonely? Because he was in pain?
Not even knowing himself, he lay face-down, clutching the grass. Just as he tried to stand up, stifling his voice...
"Don't you think you should go back to the village, Lord Justice?"
Justice looked around for the source of the voice, but all he could see was darkness. As the distant trees rustled in the night breeze, the concerned voice rang out again.
"I told you traveling alone is impossible. Go ask Riot to come with you."
Justice turned around and finally noticed a single torch.
A familiar voice drew closer.
It was Chris, his face still pale.

"Did you follow me all the way here by yourself?" Startled, Justice tried to step toward him. "You shouldn't be here. You'd better go back. Go back to the village."

But Chris just chuckled softly. "Stop bossing me around, Blood Sworn." Chris spat out those unexpected words. "I'm the one who's worried about you. I'd like you to be grateful."

"Chris, what are you—" Justice stopped in his tracks without thinking.

She had also felt something off about the voice that had just called him a Blood Pact member.

But as he looked closely at Chris's familiar face again, he held his breath. That face, with its gentle smile, was still the Chris he knew - and yet the expression on his lips was clearly a wicked grin.

"You... don't tell me..."

"Hehe, surprised? You look pretty anxious. If you're scared, maybe you should just go home? Ask Riot to accompany you." As he spoke, he twisted his lips into a sneer. "Just like you'd beg for Mama's milk."

Justice stood up in the meadow, leaning on his Holy War Staff. His aqua-blue eyes began to radiate the power of a Holy War Officer. "Are you... a Blood Sworn?"

"You're surprisingly dumb. If you were, the Holy War Staff would be glowing. If you don't even know something like that, you'll never see your dad again."

With those words, Justice lunged at Chris. But Chris vanished from right in front of him and reappeared behind Justice.

"Where the.....!!" Justice was astonished by the speed, but instinctively tried to bring the Holy War Staff down.

But Chris, still laughing, pointed his index finger at the Holy War Officer. "Okay, that's enough."

"Guh!" The Holy War Staff slipped from Justice's hands. An invisible force manipulated them, tightening its grip around his neck. Holding his own throat, Justice rolled onto the ground in agony.

Chris stifled a delighted roar of laughter. "Don't push yourself. You can't do anything on your own, after all."

"Y-you know about my father!"

"If you want to know, you'll have to ask me nicely." Chris shrugged, feigning exasperation. "Though I don't really want to tell a Holy Warrior who doesn't know the first thing about manners."

Instantly, all strength drained from his arms. Regaining his breath, Justice coughed violently. Suppressing the rage welling up inside him, the Holy Warrior fixed his gaze on Chris. "Just how involved are you in this incident...?"

"How deep do you think? Why don't you try using your own brain for a change?" The Chris standing before him was no longer just a frail boy. He was a man who had gained some great power, grown overconfident, and now cast a contemptuous gaze upon others. Evil desires swirled in his eyes.

"What is your goal...?"

"My goal? Well, power. Magical power." Chris said it as if it were nothing. "They said if I capture you and hand you over, they'll give me the power of magic."

"Why would you want something like that...?"
"I want it. I hate this body of mine." Chris cleared his throat and spat. "Contaminated by magic, I can't even work properly... I don't need a body like this."
"Even if you get magic, it won't be your true power."
"I want the kind of power you use when you perform miracles. That's all."
"But that doesn't mean you should just go around using magic so carelessly..."
"I can get such incredible power this easily. Why would I bother with serious training?"
"Is becoming strong all that matters to you?!"
"Of course. The ones wasting their time on pointless effort are the fools. In this world, only those who realize this get the good life. Well, it's a piece of cake, isn't it?"
Justice listened to those words with a shudder. That which lurks deep within the human soul: Madness. Desire. Obsession. The evil that resides within everyone is unleashed by touching magic.
Even Chris, right now, was exposing those murky depths of his heart without hesitation. The thought that such deep darkness existed within the heart of that frail boy sent a chill down his spine - or was what Justice was seeing merely the edge of that darkness?
He wants power. Would he form a Blood Pact for that reason alone?
Holding his breath, Justice picked up the Holy War Staff. "Who are you planning to form a Blood Pact with...? And where is my father...?"
"Don't make me say it over and over. If you want to know, bow your head." Chris broke into a broad grin. "But well, I'll tell you what I can. And I'll let you meet your father, too." With a cruel smile, Chris nodded. "My master is Lord Nmul Tatula."
As soon as he said it, he swung the torch in his hand in a wide circle above his head.
In the darkness, a ring of flame appeared as an afterimage - but it was no illusion.
The circle of flame that appeared above Chris's head swelled, grew, and expanded in an instant.
Justice instinctively flinched at the blast of hot wind. The Holy War Staff glowed red, but the warning light was stronger than usual.
Just then, deep within his eardrums, a cruel thought resonated in a low voice.
"Mul-Tatu Elfgrun... El-Mul-Tatu..."
"Aaah...!" Justice let out a short scream. The words echoed inside his skull, and the ground beneath his feet crumbled away.
Chris's smile vanished from his vision, and everything was filled with utter darkness. That was the last thing he remembered.
Just as he was about to call out someone's name, Justice's consciousness faded.

【Chapter 4: Temple of Guidance / Truth】

She sat up as if startled. Then she realized it was a dream. "What the...?" Riot, now awake, exhaled heavily through her shoulders. Having nightmares was nothing new. But from tonight's nightmare, a sense of desolation lingered stronger than the fear.

Wiping the sweat from her forehead, Riot suddenly began to piece together the threads of her memory. (What on earth am I doing.....) In that instant, the image of the Evil Spirit came flooding back into my mind. The atrocities committed against the village. The pools of blood from the villagers who had been trampled underfoot. Justice, unable to move...

In a panic, I tried to jump up. "Jus...!"

"He’s gone now." A voice suddenly sounded right next to her ear. When she turned around, Regios was sitting right beside her.

Once again, on the meadow shrouded in morning mist, the two of them lay side by side, wrapped in blankets.

"Gone... Wait, what happened after the attack yesterday?" Riot asked, glancing at the people lying around them.

Regios’ cheeks were slightly sunken, and the signs of exhaustion were plain to see. "Everyone in the village found out his secret. That’s why he went to the inn at Bazara." The Holy War General said this with a sigh. "He asked me to look after you."

Riot’s gaze darted around in confusion. Her greatsword was there. Her weapons were right beside her. That was all she needed to set out. She grabbed them all at once, stood up, and dashed straight down the hill.

"Riot!" Weaving through the sleeping villagers, Regios gave chase. He ran recklessly through the morning mist and finally caught his arm at the foot of the hill.

Regios pulled Riot back forcefully. "What are you going to do there?!"

"Isn't it obvious? I’m going to see it through!" As if on the verge of tears, Riot shook off his hand. "You said despair awaits me, but I don’t care! I want to go!"

"Justice knows it’s a fate too painful to bear." Regios grabbed her arm again and looked deep into Riot’s eyes. "That’s why he decided to face his fate alone. Don’t waste his kindness."

"What do you mean "kindness"?!" Riot clenched her fists and looked down. "He doesn’t understand anything... He doesn’t understand me at all..."

"Riot..."

"He keeps saying that if I stay here, I’ll be happy. If I live with Regios, I’ll be happy... That’s not... that’s not..."

Hearing her tearful voice, Regios released his grip on her hand. "...Am I that bad?"

"No, that’s not it..." Riot grabbed Regios’s arm and cried out in frustration. "It’s not that I hate you... It’s just that if I don’t go after Justice now, I’ll regret it for the rest of my life... I’ll definitely regret it..!"

"I knew it..." As if in acceptance, Regios exhaled. "At the inn in Bazara... maybe I knew it from the moment I first saw you, carrying Justice and fighting so desperately... that the bond between you two could never be broken."

"Regios..."

"That’s why I saved you. That’s why I brought you to my home. Even with the Heretical Crest, I believed — I wanted to believe — that there was no deceit or betrayal in this bond..." Regios gazed into Riot’s eyes. "I wasn’t wrong, was I?"

"Because I can trust you... about me..."

Did he fall for her? That’s what he wanted to ask himself, but it was a pointless question. It’s the same with Riot. At first, she couldn’t trust Regios.

(But just because I came to trust him doesn’t mean I fell for him... Only now do I realize how I feel. There were so many moments when I felt happy just being with him. We shared those moments together. That’s all there is to it.)

And yet, before I knew it, tears were falling again. I wiped them away with my hand, and then... "I have to go." I brushed away my tears and smiled at Regios. "It’s been two years since he’s traveled alone. He probably got lost somewhere. If we don’t go find him, he might get eaten by a mutant beast or something."

But Regios’s expression remained stiff. "I understand. But I’m coming too."Regios’s gaze had, without my noticing, shifted to that of a Holy War General. "Justice might not have made it to the inn at Bazara yet."

"What do you mean?"

"He’s fallen into the hands of the Evil Spirit. That’s what I think."

A flash of lightning streaked across Riot’s back.

It looked like a deep forest. Trees stretched as far as the eye could see, and a thick mist hung low at their feet. But the trees, with their twisting branches, looked like dark red tentacles.

In fact, countless mouths were breathing on their trunks. The white, smoky mist, as if possessed of a will of its own, continued to writhe. Wincing at the nauseating stench, Justice groaned softly.

"Lovely place, isn’t it, Holy Warrior Justice?" Chris’s mocking laughter sounded unnervingly close.

When he turned his gaze, he saw the boy, wearing a cruel smile, sitting on the roots of a massive tree. Leaning against his back was Justice’s Holy War Staff.

"Everyone’s welcoming you too, see?" Behind Justice, several presences rose up. From the depths of the mist, a blue-green humanoid form stretched out silently and wrapped itself around Justice’s body.

The slimy-skinned figure was a woman casting a lewd gaze. However, her lower half belonged to a giant serpent, its body covered in black spots. She extended a tongue as thick as an arm from between her sharp fangs and flicked it against Justice’s neck. With her abnormally long arms, she groped the Holy Warrior’s body, rubbing her ample breasts against him insistently.

Justice tried to resist, but his body would not move at all. Chris watches the women’s caresses with satisfaction. Laughing at Justice's agony, the serpent women continue to restrain his body.

"Looks like you’re not used to women. These creatures... aren’t they Evil Spirits...? If you’d like, you could get along with them even better. Then shall I bring a human woman? If that’s what it takes for Lord Justice to fall, I’ll grant your wish. What kind of woman would you like?"

"Don’t be ridiculous," Justice finally groaned.

"If you’re going to drown in lust, you’re unfit to be a Holy Warrior... Well, what should I do?" Chris pretended to ponder the matter, rubbing his chin. "Lord Justice, I really wish you’d come over to our side with me."

"Don’t be ridiculous. If that’s an invitation, I’ll pass." Gradually regaining his composure, Justice ignored the snake woman and continued. "I’d choose death over corruption. That’s what a Holy War Officer is."

"You say ‘corruption,’ but is joining the Blood Sworn really such a bad thing?" Chris replied without losing his smile. "Humans have all kinds of desires. Hunger, greed,

lust... To fulfill those desires, we borrow just a little of the Spirits' evil power That’s all there's to it."

"But to do that, you pay a price to the Evil Spirit! With other people’s lives and precious things!"

"I had something precious taken from me, too. It’s only fair that I take something from them now, isn’t it?"

At those words, Justice locked eyes with him. "What happened to you, Chris... You can’t just form a Blood Pact just because you want power. If you change your mind now, it’s not too late."

"It’s too late. I’ve already made up my mind." Chris stood up and took hold of Justice's Holy War Staff. "I’m going to take my revenge on the one who did this to my body. To do that, I need power. And to gain that power, Lord Justice, I’ve promised to sacrifice you."

"Isn’t your body contaminated by magic? If so, shouldn’t you be targeting the source of that contamination — the Evil Spirits?"

"I don’t hold a grudge against them. The one I resent is a man just like you." He said this, staring intently at the Holy War Staff. "Because of Regios, both my father and mother died."

"What...?"

"That fool was deceived by an Evil Spirit. Deceived, cornered, and turned the town where I lived into a battlefield. Because of that, my town was contaminated by magic to the point where it’s uninhabitable."

"No way! What are you—"

"No, it’s all that man’s fault! My body, my father, and my mother — we were all contaminated by magic from that battle. If only that man hadn’t been deceived by the Evil Spirit, I wouldn’t have ended up with this weak body! I wouldn’t have been sold to the butcher! I wouldn’t have had to rely on everyone’s pity!"

"Chris, you—"

"Yeah, I hate it! I hate being weak and being a burden to everyone! You won't understand... Not being able to help anyone, living while everyone protects me... I hated that! I wanted to swap this body with someone else! I wanted to start over!" He kept screaming, then suddenly regained his smile. "But I can start over. Life is surprisingly simple, isn’t it?"

Justice stared at Chris calmly. Even though he hasn’t formed a Blood Pact yet, he was already deeply involved with the Evil Spirits. His mental balance had likely collapsed after receiving the Evil Spirit’s thoughts.

It was a cold, ruthless smile that didn’t seem at all like that of a young boy. "Once I gain the power of magic, even he’ll have to reconsider his opinion of me." Chris boasted of himself, breaking into sing-speak. "He won’t be able to look down on me like he used to. I’m looking forward to seeing him."

"Are you... planning to fight Regios?" Justice held his breath, waiting for an answer.

Chris glared at the Holy War Officer with a pleased expression. "Of course I am." As he spoke, his expression suddenly changed. "I won’t forgive that man’s foolishness." It was the expression of a vengeful man, his fury laid bare.

"It ends here..." Riot pointed at the ground and sighed. Justice's footprints led all the way to the middle of the vast meadow. But his trail had suddenly vanished from there. "Hey, did he really get captured by the Demon God? Maybe he just took a different path..."

She hoped Regios's reading was wrong. That wish slipped out before she could stop it. But Regios pointed to another spot on the ground, calming the frantic Riot. "No, look at this."

There, footprints clearly different from Justice's were left in sharp relief. They were noticeably smaller than those of a Holy War Officer. "What's this? They're not his footprints. Didn't Riggs or someone come here yesterday?"

"If that were the case, there should be footprints leading from my house to here. There aren't any. These footprints start here and end here." Regios examined them calmly and realized something. Then he sighed. "They're probably Chris's."

"Chris? How do you know that?"

"I know. He vanished the moment Justice disappeared."

"...Don't lie to me..." At those definitive words, Riot felt a chill run down her spine.

"I didn't realize it until I disappeared myself. But I'm certain."

"Why he... Why would he do something like that..."

Gritting his teeth slightly, Regios endured the grief. "He hates me."

Riot stared at Regios with a look of surprise. An unusually cold wind swept across the meadow.

Chris struck the ground with Justice's Holy War Staff. Suddenly, a translucent sphere rose from the white mist.

Inside it stood Regios, clad in the armor of the Papal Regiment. Beside him stood a young woman with black hair flowing down to her waist.

"Big brother was supposed to marry this person. Her name was Airi. They make a perfect pair, don't they?" Chris was right. She was petite and delicate. Her lustrous black hair swayed in the wind as she scattered carefree smiles around her. Her demure, sparkling eyes held a hidden intelligence. The two of them were like the knight and the beautiful princess spoken of in legends.

"She was the daughter of an ordinary knight. Her status was too low to become the wife of a Holy War knight. Even so, the two of them loved each other deeply. It's a nice story, just like Regios, isn't it?"

Justice stared silently at the image. Was Chris's story true? There was no way to verify it.

Chris watched the bewildered Justice with a pleased expression. "But she fell from grace." Justice fixed him with a stern gaze. But Chris shook his head. "You don't believe it, do you? But it's the truth. She was a very devout believer and an innocent person... but she had desires too. No, it's more accurate to say those desires began to sprout."

"..."

"She fell in love with Regios. That's where it all went wrong." Chris switched the footage. The sphere showed Regios wielding his sword on the battlefield. "He was

a hero - in the truest sense of the word. But he was always on the battlefield. That worried her to no end. The fear of not knowing when her lover might die. The loneliness of being left behind alone. She couldn’t bear it."

"She couldn't be certain, so she made a choice." Chris stifled a chuckle. "To have Regios all to herself..."

The scene shifted again. In the deep darkness, Airi was in a state of confusion, her hair disheveled. Countless black shadows flitted about her. "If Regios made a blunder on the battlefield, he’d be stripped of his title as Holy War General. Then he wouldn’t have to go to the battlefield and could stay with her... That’s what the Spirits whispered. To satisfy her own desires, she leaked the Pope’s Regiment’s battle plans."

This time, the screen showed a battlefield engulfed in flames. A murky torrent of fire crawling across the ground swallowed the horde of Holy Knights and tore through the defensive miracles of the Holy War Officers. The sphere also captured the figure of Regios, frozen in the midst of it all.

"My battalion was annihilated." In the middle of the pasture, Regios confessed as well. "They were the elite I had nurtured with my own hands... subordinates I trusted. They’re all dead. Because of me." The passing wind grew colder.

The clouds thickened, and soon small raindrops began to fall. Even so, Riot stood there with Regios.

"So, what about Airi..."

"I cut her down. I had no choice but to do it." Turning his face toward the rainy sky, Regios said.

Riot didn’t even notice the thunder rumbling in the distance. "You loved her, didn’t you..."

Regios clenched his fist and exhaled. "I am a Holy War General. I cannot let a Blood Pact member go. After so many of my comrades were killed, Airi was nothing but an enemy to me."

At those words, Riot’s face clouded over with sadness. "You’re lying." Riot snapped, as if scolding him. "If you really think that, then look at me and say it."

But Regios didn’t respond. He simply let the raindrops fall on his face, getting soaked to the bone. It wasn’t just rain running down her cheeks.

"I was worried about you. I wanted you to stay by my side forever." Is wishing for that a form of corruption?" Are you saying that loving you is evil?" Through the spherical image, Airi was asking Regios. Then she threw herself into Regios’s arms and wept uncontrollably.

But the sword Regios had drawn plunged deep into Airi’s chest. Piercing her frail body, the blade emerged through her back. As Airi’s body collapsed, Regios also sank to his knees on the spot. "And so, my life as a hero has come to an end."

Chris clapped his hands as if he had just watched a play come to a close. "Ignoring the Pope’s men who tried to stop him, he left the New World Crusade and came to this land. Bringing along us lost children, too. But as for the second act, there’s nothing

worth showing." Leaning the Holy War Staff against a tree, Chris shrugged his shoulders ostentatiously. "After all, he's been doing nothing but farm work."

"Even if what you just said is true..." Justice opened his mouth, as if waking from a nightmare. "Why are you seeking revenge on Regios? There's no connection between the two of you..."

"We do. There IS a connection." Chris stared at the frozen image with a grim expression. He held his hand over the figure of the devastated Regios and advanced the memory once more. "It's the final part of Act One. This is where my life started to go wrong..."

The footage shifted to a city engulfed in flames.

"The one manipulating Airi was the Demon King Ronu Dorunur." Regios uttered the name with a muffled voice. "When I tried to kill Airi, he challenged me to a fight. Along with Airi."

"And you..."

"I cut down Airi, and I cut down the Demon King." In response to Riot's question, the Holy War General nodded deeply. "It was urban warfare. In a city called Srigam... The Demon King tried to annihilate me — and the entire city — with his powerful magic. I won, but after the battle, Srigam was reduced to ruins."

The rain grew heavier, and their drenched bodies grew cold. Even so, Riot did not stop questioning Regios. "So Chris was in that city, wasn't he?"

"He was, along with his parents. That's why he resents me." Regios recalled the past and swallowed his bitterness. "It just so happened that the battle took place there. But from Chris's perspective, I suppose he wouldn't see it that way."

"I guess... But that doesn't mean you should..."

"Of course he does. If I hadn't been deceived by Airi, there wouldn't have been a battle in Srigam. No, even if I had been deceived, there might not have been any particular reason to fight in Srigam."

"Do you regret that you should have fought outside the city?"

"If I could have. But facing the Demon King, I didn't have the power to choose the battlefield. The Demon King probably challenged me to battle knowing that I'd be thrown into confusion in urban combat - and I was thrown into confusion." Regios exhaled as if in repentance. "Chris's life changed because of that battle. I was the one who started it. And then, tainted by magic, his parents died. It's only natural that he resents me."

"You... you knew? About Chris's feelings..."

"No... I felt sorry for him, but... I never thought it would go as far as to push him towards making a Blood Oath."

Riot looked down at Chris's footprints etched into the ground. The pounding rain was gradually distorting their shape. "So Chris intends to form a Blood Oath to take revenge on you, huh? How can we save them? Justice and Chris..." Riot spoke of them with the same weight.

Regios, too, understood the Battle Armor Demon's true intentions. "We'll follow them and meet them. That's our only option."

"Wait, but how?" Riot scanned the grassland lashed by the rain. "There aren't any traces left. I can't even detect any residual magic."

"Not for you, but it's enough for me." Regios quietly held out his right hand. His palm emitted a faint, pale holy light. On the ground before them, Chris's footprints began to glow distinctly. "The dimensional rift hasn't closed completely yet. We have no choice but to go."

Riot swallowed hard. Crossing the dimensional barrier - Regios said it as if it were nothing, but even the Battle Armor Demon shuddered.

Taking her hand, Regios nodded firmly. "Don't let go of my hand. Justice is waiting for us."

"Please, I'm counting on you." The Holy War General formed a holy seal, radiating a dazzling holy light all around them. "Fifth Strike: Holy Path Dimensional Breakthrough."

The light enveloped Riot, and flashes of light burst out in all directions. (Amazing...)

Riot gazed up at the luminous world. (It's like stars are falling...)

And the two of them soared off into the distance.

"Your revenge is wrong, Chris." Justice declared this while still bound by the snake women. "I'm sure Regios is suffering from a heavy sense of guilt. That's why he resigned as a Holy War General, and why he... raised you, isn't it?"

"That's exactly what I resent." Chris sat down at the base of the tree again and clicked his tongue. "You don't understand my feelings at all, do you, Lord Justice? I..."

"No, neither I nor Regios..."

"Listen to me! Justice!" His eyes were bloodshot, unbecoming of a child. Chris bared his fangs. "He burned my town, killed my parents, and did this to my body... I hated being shown compassion by someone who did that. I hated my body even more — a body that couldn't even lay a finger on him."

"..."

"But I'm no match for Regios. I'm no match for the power of that Holy War General. That's why I'll borrow the power of something even greater... the power of the Demon King Nmul-Tatura. Then, I'll be able to..."

"A Demon King...!" Justice shuddered at the name. During the "Ancient Catastrophe," the Demon Kings wiped out half the continent. They were by no means a Demon God of a rank low enough to lend a hand to a mere child's revenge.

This was a conspiracy on a scale far beyond what Justice had imagined.

"You see, Lord Justice, I just can't believe in the God of Creation." Chris said, laughing loudly. "Why do we have to suffer like this? Driven from our homes, our parents dead, our bodies ravaged... Whose fault is it that the world has become like this? It's because the Creator God is gone, isn't it?"

"It was the Demon God Emperor who banished the Creator God..."

"Being banished just proves the Creator God is powerless. A Creator God like that is unfit for the role." He spat out the name in contempt. "In this world, the powerful win and reap the rewards. The most powerful being in this world is the Demon

Emperor. That’s why I don’t believe in the Creator God. He never helped me even when I prayed."

Justice was terrified by that logic. It was the typical despair that people fell into that led them to become Blood Pact members. The more they touched magic, the deeper and stronger that despair became. Chris, too, had been swallowed by despair and had lost his childlike innocence.

"Chris, it’s not too late yet." Justice called out, struggling against the Snake Woman’s superhuman strength. "You can’t become a Blood Pact Member. Even if you were granted magic on the level of the Demon God King, surely... surely you wouldn’t be able to handle it. Who knows what the backlash would do to you..."

"I don’t really care if I die," Chris said in a resigned tone. "I won’t live much longer anyway. But if I’ve killed Brother Regios first, I’ll be more than satisfied. It’ll make my death worthwhile."

"You’re just being used! Don’t you get it?!" Justice shouted back desperately. "The Demon King is plotting something much bigger. He’s just using you for that!"

"I know."

"What do you mean...?"

"Lord Nmul Tatula wants to capture you, Justice." Chris said this with a look of pride. "I heard that’s why he killed Old Man Rodon, too - all to make you look suspicious so you’d leave the village. It’s hard for him to make a move while you’re with Regios."

"So he was after me all along..."

"And to lure me in... I wanted to see just how strong I’d become if I formed a Blood Pact... That’s why I had the Demon Generals attack the village during the day."

"No way! You did all that just for that?!"

"Heh heh, it was important to me. That power was incredible... Seeing that battle is what made me decide to form a Blood Pact. And that’s how I got this power." Saying that, Chris pointed at Justice. Instantly, the Heretical Crest on the back of his hand began to glow red.

Justice stared at Chris with sorrowful eyes. "So it was you..."

"That’s right. Thanks to that, I managed to safely separate you from Regios. And now that I’ve captured Lord Justice as well, I’d say the operation was a huge success."

"So Nmul Tatula can bestow crests like that, too..."

"Whoa, don’t get the wrong idea." Chris waved his hand to dismiss that notion. "Even if I am with Lord Nmul-Tatula, I could never presume to use the Dark God Emperor’s crest. This came from someone else."

"Someone else... Who else could it be?!"

"The one who slaughtered everyone at the Bazara inn." At those words, the blood drained from Justice’s face.

"Th-that’s..."

"You know who I mean. The one who strung the villagers’ heads on twelve spears. That person is a blood oath-sworn vassal directly under the Demon Emperor’s command — and the one who truly wants to capture you, Lord Justice."

Justice’s heart began to race. He wanted to cover his ears. But Chris stood up and crept closer. "Lord Nmul Tatula acted at that person’s request. And I moved as well."

"Stop it, Chris, that’s enough... Don’t say another word..."

"I’ll say it. You’ve realized it, haven’t you? Or are you afraid to hear it? I suppose that makes sense..." Chris let out a long, drawn-out laugh, flashing a cruel grin. "That person’s name is..."

"Stop it!"

"That's enough, Chris."

At Justice’s scream, that thought intruded once more. The Holy War Officer’s skull vibrated again, and Justice’s face contorted in pain - but the thought resonated from a closer position.

"It is our duty to tell all. Those who have not yet formed a Blood Pact, step back. I have no use for the verbose. Begone."

The flames that engulfed the surroundings surged upward, whipping up a hot wind. Justice turned his face away from the heat, his limbs stiffening under the overwhelming presence.

"O Eternal Flame, the Blazing Crown, Lord Nmul-Tatula!" Chris prostrated himself to greet his master. "As the price of our Blood Pact, I have captured the Holy War Officer, Justice! With this living sacrifice, grant me a glimpse of your profound magic!" Having already lost his childlike innocence, Chris spoke with the diction befitting a worthy candidate for the Blood Pact.

But the thoughts of the Demon King Nmul-Tatura coldly ignored his plea. "I judged that Justice would let his guard down if the sacrifice were a child. The scheme succeeded. Yet, in a way, it has also failed. Have you grown complacent, Chris, now that you’ve captured Justice? You forgot to seal the dimensional rift. I guess we can chalk it up to your inexperience."

Startled, Chris looked up in terror. He scrambled to his feet and spread his arms wide. As a ring of crimson magical light formed between his arms, an image appeared within the circle.

The figures of Riot and Regios, passing through the starry sky and plunging into the dark ocean. Justice’s face stiffened, and Chris’s expression paled.

"Don’t come here, Riot!"

"The sacrifice must not speak!" Chris roared, and a snake woman slashed at Justice’s profile.

"Gah...!" As she struck, her sharp claws tore into his skin, causing blood to gush from Justice’s cheek.

"If you scream, I’ll slit your throat next." Chris glared at Justice with a defiant look. "But then again, maybe that’s for the best. When those two finally make it here and find Justice’s corpse, they’ll surely be heartbroken."

The snake women slowly lapped up the blood dripping from Justice’s face.

Undeterred, Justice locked eyes with Chris. "If you’re going to kill me, then kill me. But I won’t let you kill those two..."

"You said it. Shall I grant your wish?" Chris smoothly drew a dagger from his waist. An unidentifiable black slime clung to the deeply curved blade. " Rejoice, Justice -

you’re the first human I’m going to kill myself. I probably won’t forget the taste for the rest of my life!"

Justice remained silent, fixing his gaze on the approaching blade. Just then, the shadow stretching behind Chris began to sway violently. A new shadow rose from within it, transforming into a black sphere and floating upward.

Sensing the presence, Chris turned around and instinctively stepped back.

"You are..."

"Your role was to capture Justice. You have no authority over life and death. Don’t talk big if you haven’t formed a Blood Pact yet."

Justice opened his eyes and stared intently at the shadow. The voice was unfamiliar, and he certainly didn’t know anyone who looked like a black sphere. But...

"I have captured the price of the Blood Pact!" Chris bowed once more before the Demon King Nmul Tatula and the black shadow. "Let the Blood Pact ritual begin now! With that power, I shall slay those two pursuers!"

"Don’t speak so lightly. Forging a Blood Pact takes time." Nmul-Tatula replied with a look of displeasure. "If they reach this place before then, you stand no chance, even if we have Justice as a hostage..."

Chris’s eyes darted about as if seeking help. The black shadow remained silent for a moment, but eventually began to speak.

"The area surrounding this Temple of Guidance is guarded by Lord Nmul-Tatula’s men."

"I suppose I’ll have to go myself - but Regios is a Holy War General. I doubt I’ll be able to buy much time."

Chris’s face contorted in shock. At those words, even Nmul-Tatura intensified the flickering of his flames.

"Ho, so you’re making a move? Even out in the wild, a Holy War General is still a Holy War General. It’s best to deal with him."

"I see, that makes sense. It is the Dark God Emperor’s wish to destroy the servants of the Creator God. I cannot let this pass."

Justice could physically feel the black shadow’s aura of intimidation intensify. He assumed this was the Blood Sworn that served under the direct command of the Demon Emperor that Chris had mentioned. Yet, rather than evil, he sensed a strangely dignified fighting spirit.

"In the meantime, complete the blood oath ceremony, Your Demon Emperor Majesty."

As the black shadow spoke, Chris raised his face, filled with hope. "Then, I too..."

"You have offered the price. Go ahead and form the Blood Pact."

"Oh!" he exclaimed in admiration, pressing his forehead to the ground.

Looking down upon him, the flames and the black shadow exchanged thoughts with magnanimity. "After that, you may perform the Justice ritual."

"Understood. Fight to your heart’s content." Nmul Tatula, his flames blazing, bowed to the black shadow. "Let us cast aside all obstacles and begin the ritual, O Blood Pact-Bound."

"As the Demon God Emperor desired, Justice has been secured.

"His fate ends here."

The black shadow vanished into the dimensional depths without a word.

Justice could do nothing but watch the scene unfold. Countless questions swirled in his mind, and Nmul Tatula's words continued to haunt him. Fate... The fate of Holy War Officer Justice...

(Where am I...?) Floating through the darkness, Riot gazed in awe at the ever-changing scenery.

The surroundings were adorned with countless points of light. Large lights, small lights. White lights, blue lights. She had heard that the night skies of planets once held

guiding beacons known as constellations - but these countless lights were incomparable to that; they resembled a nebula of stars.

Piercing through the stars, Riot raced down the dimensional fault line. Holding Riot's hand, Regios soared alongside him. Yet his form seemed transparent, as if melting into the sea of stars.

Eventually, the two reached the skies above a gigantic vortex. True darkness from which even the stars could not escape, and the gravity of an abyss from which even time could not escape.

(Don't let go, Riot) Regios's voice echoed directly in his consciousness. (Just a little longer.)

And then, Riot was swallowed by the Demon Realm.

A screeching sound that made her eardrums vibrate. A cold wind clinging to her skin. All she could see was the stagnant, toxic air. The pressure squeezing her ribs turned into nausea.

(Ugh... uuuuuugh...!) Riot thrashed about as if clawing at his throat. It felt as if she were drowning in muddy water. She craved fresh air.

But the speed of her descent was rapidly increasing. Falling, falling, falling... And before she knew it...

A thick fog enveloped the world. The surroundings were a swamp shrouded in unpleasant humidity. Obscene trees stretched out, encircling her.

Before she knew it, Regios's shadow had materialized and was standing right in front of her. Riot was also standing on the slimy ground, but unable to bear the stench, she covered her mouth.

"Gah... haah..."

"Are you okay, Riot?" Regios gently rubbed her trembling back.

Fighting off the unrelenting chills, Riot glared around him. "Where... am I...?"

"It's a world that shares the same timeline as ours, but exists on a different spatial axis."

"What does that even mean? Explain it in simpler terms."

"Even if I explained it, it wouldn't change anything." Regios, too, scanned the area with a wary gaze. "It's not a world inhabited by normal humans. Just accept that."

"I'd at least like to know where I am." Riot finally drew the electromagnetic greatsword from her back and readied it with both hands.

The enemy was undoubtedly a high-ranking Demon God. She knew physical weapons were useless, but she couldn't help but feel anxious unless she gripped her sword as usual.

(Wait for me until I get there.) She prayed silently and steeled her resolve.

Seeing Riot press her lips together, Regios quietly formed a holy seal. "Truth be told, this is a place you shouldn't be in." He directed the holy seal toward Riot's body as she came to a halt.

"Sixth Strike: Guardian Deity-Enhanced Defense" A pale blue light radiating from Regios's holy seal enveloped Riot's entire body. While Riot, every strand of his hair covered in holy light, stood in astonishment, Regios rearranged his seal and held it up to the electromagnetic greatsword.

"Seventh Strike: Demon-Slaying Sword Strike." This time, a red spiritual aura wrapped itself around the blade of the electromagnetic greatsword. Riot gripped the sword, which had suddenly grown heavier, firmly. "This is all I can do for you." Regios released the holy seal and caught his breath. "You can fight a little longer. But don't push yourself too hard. You have to make it back alive to see Justice."

"How many times can you use a miracle, anyway? You've done it so many times since last night..."

Though it barely showed on his face, Regios must have been quite exhausted. It was unlikely he'd gotten any sleep while Riot was unconscious.

Even so, Regios shook his head at her worried gaze. "Don't worry. I'm not like Justice."

"Well, that's true, but..."

"I just need to save you before my miracles run out." Regios drew his long swords in both hands, his white hair swaying. "I'll cut my way through. Don't stray from my side."

"You're always giving out orders, aren't you?"

"Sorry about that. I guess that's just how it goes on the battlefield."

"It's fine. I'm just not used to it yet." Then, the two turned their gaze toward the distance.

The white mist stretched on endlessly as always. There was no sign of the enemy — not a shadow, not a shape, not even a sound. However, the two subtly spaced themselves apart, creating room to swing their weapons.

"They're coming."

"Looks like it."

Synchronizing their breathing, they shifted their formation, moving forward and backward. Then, the space around them began to shift and transform. The mist thinned, and the ground finally came into view - but it was hardly what one would call "ground."

From the reddish-black, slimy soil, cilia-like plants trembled and stretched upward, a musty stench emanating from them. The branches of the trees, which had reached overhead, were transforming into sponge-like masses speckled with spots.

A winding path stretched out before Riot - but even that path, upon closer inspection, was constantly writhing.

The earth was alive, the trees were alive, and even the path was breathing. The world inhabited by the Evil Spirits had finally cast off its false form.

"Wa-el-ieeeeeee... Ielwaaaaaa....."

Riot instinctively leapt back at the sudden earthquake. But the tremors grew more violent, and as if unable to contain themselves any longer, they erupted all at once.

"Ugh.....!" Riot's entire body bristled.

Countless streams of black slime welled up from the ground. The fountains of sticky liquid resembled tar, twisting and writhing as if in agony. The ground, exposed by Regios, began to emit a grating, ear-piercing screech.

"Evil Priest Iena Nuu." Regios pulled his longsword from the ground and positioned himself with Riot at his back. "Show yourself. We don't have time."

The slime-like lifeforms covering the ground began to gather in various places. They piled on top of one another and stretched upward. Gradually swelling to form a

physical body, the slime transformed into a colossal figure towering over them, possessed of a long, centipede-like body. Its was covered in jet-black carapace, densely lined with bony legs. However, only the front pair of legs was abnormally enlarged. Three hooked claws extended from the front legs, and the tips alone were as thick as a human leg. And from the bizarre, wide-open mouth, similar fangs protruded.

The Dark Priest Iena Nu, having revealed its true form, lined up four of itself in battle formation. "Wael, Iel, Nue... Nue, Nael, Kurtagun..."

Riot felt overwhelmed by their formidable defenses. Four Dark Priests. It was a force capable of obliterating a city-state in an instant.

Yet the sword she held was imbued with the miracle of Regios - and past this vanguard, Justice was waiting for her.

(I'll break through...) She closed the distance with a sudden lunge. (I'll survive and meet you. Then I'll...)

She wanted Justice to understand that her place was right here.

"My place is only on the battlefield."

Roars clashed. Riot had regained her fire.

"Latura, El, Tatula... Nmuru, Haru, En, Tatula..." The Demon King Nmul-Tatura cast aside human language and began the ritual in the Demon tongue.

A cursed resonance echoed throughout the surroundings, violently shaking Justice's very marrow. The Holy Warrior endured the agony, but Chris let out a cry of joy.

"Oh, Lord... My Lord, Crown ablaze with eternal flames... Usurper of North Guiana... Lord Nmul-Tatura, King of the Evil Spirits..." As the communion deepened, the ground beneath Chris's feet began to glow red.

First, luminous forbidden symbols emerged, forming a circle. The circle, spinning and dancing, eventually gave birth to a new star-shaped formation within it. Justice had seen the Blood Oath Pentagram only a few times before, but this was the first time he had witnessed its formation process firsthand.

"Latura, El, Tatula... Nmuru, Haru, En, Tatula..."

As the incantation continued, the Blood Oath Array neared completion.

"Snap out of it, Chris..." Believing in a sliver of hope, Justice called out. "If you cancel the Blood Oath now, you can still... Gahhh!" Mid-sentence, the Holy War Officer let out a scream.

The snake women entwined around him from both sides had sunk their claws into Justice's thighs. The sharp claws pierced through his sacred armor, mercilessly tearing into his flesh - but even as his white armor was stained with blood, Justice forced out a voice.

"Let's go home, Chris! This isn't where you belong!"

"That's for me to decide." Chris turned around, still standing within the Blood Oath Pentagram. "Where you belong is something you decide for yourself. It's not something others get to order you around about."

"It's not an order, I'm just..."

"It’s the same thing, even if it’s just advice." Chris felt the power beginning to surge around him and smirked to himself. "People all live their lives as they please. Big bro Regios was stopped by the Pope, but he stepped down. No matter who tries to stop me, I’m going down this path. And you... It’s the same for you, isn’t it? No matter how much doubt surrounds you, you’re struggling to prove that you’re a Holy War Officer. Forever and ever." He pointed at Justice and sneered. "We’re both just stubborn, aren’t we?"

"No. I won’t give up, but... You have given up. On being human." The Holy Warrior declared this, ignoring the snake women clinging to him. "We are weak... but that doesn’t mean it’s right to so easily acquire power beyond that of human capabilities."

"What’s the difference between my magic and your miracles? They’re both powers beyond that of mere humans."

"Miracles are the power of those who refuse to give up. Magic is the power of those who have given up."

Their voices clashed with the Demon King’s incantation.

But Justice kept weaving his words, refusing to admit defeat. "Are you going to succumb to temptation...? Do you really think you’re that weak...?"

"With a body like this, even you would give up." Chris spat out the words in a resigned tone. "You really don’t understand me at all. You’re an elite, after all. A prodigy — one in a hundred thousand. Pampered by everyone, cherished and revered..."

"We’re all living on the same New Continent. There’s no one out there who’s truly basking in happiness."

"Bullshit, compared to me, you're lucky. You’ll never understand how it feels to be consumed by magic, to live crawling on the ground."

"Did you... want me to understand...?" There was no answer to his question.

Justice gazed at Chris. With clear, sky-blue eyes, staring straight ahead.

But Chris turned his back, as if to escape that gaze. "In any case, it’s too late now." Chris said this with a touch of self-mockery. "The power of the Demon King is already flowing through my body. I’m no longer myself..."

"Wait, Chris!" Realizing the time had come, Justice cried out.

But the forbidden characters had already covered the ground at Chris’s feet. Tens of thousands of those symbols glowed red all at once, engulfing Chris’s entire body.

Upon the completed Blood Oath Array, Chris’s shadow suddenly grew larger. "Oh, Lord... O Demon King Nmul-Tatura... I cast off my old body... along with my old life... With this new flesh, I shall repay the Eternal Blood Oath..." Suddenly, Chris’s voice sounded decades older. A deep, bass voice, like that of a middle-aged man, resonated from his throat.

"Chris! Chris!"

"It is rude to address me by my old name, Holy Warrior." Turning leisurely toward the astonished Justice, Chris spoke. "Now that I have gained power, shall you call me by a new name? Chris of the Blood Pact."

The light faded, revealing his body. The shabby peasant clothes vanished, and Chris’s body was now clad in black armor. A two-handed sword studded with countless

spikes rested on his back, and he clutched a misshapen helmet in his hand. Resembling a knight of darkness, Chris was reborn.

Justice stared intently at the forehead of the boy who had introduced himself. On his once-pale skin, the emblem of the Demon Realm was clearly etched. In his eyes, too, there was no longer any trace of the boy.

As if to celebrate the birth of a Blood Pact member, the voice of Nmul Tatula echoed. "Latura, El, Tatula... Nmuru, Haru, En, Tatula..."

He had failed to save Chris.

That, more than anything, filled Justice with regret.

【Chapter 5: Temple of Guidance / Inferno】

"Wael, Iel, Nue... Nue, El, Kurtagun..." The four Dark Priests, Iena Nu, advanced their ranks. When lightning shot forth from their bodies, Regios issued a warning.

"Fall back! They're coming!" Without understanding why, Riot leaped backward.

Aiming at the two retreating figures, the Dark Priests unleashed a barrage of lightning bolts - but the lightning didn't travel in a straight line; it scattered in all directions.

As the bolts vanished into the thick fog, they struck the two from behind the very next moment. The trail that should have disappeared to the right now attacked from beneath their feet.

"Gaaaah!" Riot let out a cry of agony as lightning struck like a pillar of fire. Her outer coat was scorched, and the surface of her leather armor was singed - but that was the extent of the damage. No matter how skillfully she dodged, even a glancing blow from the Evil Priest should have inflicted devastating damage.

That's how powerful the defensive miracle Regios had cast was. No functional impairment whatsoever. Her fighting spirit surged through her entire body.

"It seems to be working," Regios asked as he retreated to the side. "My miracle, I mean."

"Yeah, it's pretty good," Riot quickly stood up and raised her greatsword to a ready stance.

Regios also switched his grip on the swords in his left and right hands to a reverse grip.

"That'll be a big help. Those guys are going to get serious from here on out."

With a deafening roar, the Evil Priests charged straight at them. Their speed, unbecoming of their massive frames, and their overwhelming presence momentarily made Riot flinch.

But the Battle Armor Demon, empowered by Regios, had regained his usual cold composure. (It's a diversion...) Her battlefield instincts told Riot as much. The Heretic Priests weren't so foolish as to simply charge head-on - this was a charge calculated on the assumption that she would dodge.

(If that's the case...) Riot lowered her center of gravity and sprinted forward, sliding into the gap. She slipped past with perfect timing and leaped right at the massive Heretic Priest's feet.

"Yel! Nae! Yel!" A stream of yellow-green mucus spewed from the Heretic Priest's mouth. It struck the spot where Riot had been standing moments before, transforming into a terrifying burst of flames.

"So that's what you were planning!" Riot lunged upward, aiming her greatsword at the Dark Priest's head, but the Dark Priest was quick as well - he opened his flat mouth with a creaking sound, preparing to fire another blast at Riot, who had closed in on him.

"Where is Justice?!" But the tip of Riot's blade had already pierced deep into the Heretic Priest's lower jaw. The screaming blade flashed with a pale, holy light. The electromagnetic greatsword, having pierced through the lower jaw, continued straight up to the upper jaw, sealing the Heretic Priest's mouth shut from below.

"Yel! Nae! Yel!" The groaning Heretic Priest's throat swelled. As if it had been building up, a yellow-green mucus oozed from his mouth with a gurgle. Trapped within his own mouth with nowhere to flow out to, it instantly transformed into a massive fireball. With his skull exploding into pieces, the first Heretic Priest collapsed to the ground.

"Regios!" Escaping the falling colossus, Riot scanned the area.

One of the evil priests stood with his back turned, frozen in place. Facing the motionless colossus, Riot braced herself.

But the top of its head slowly cracked open, and the colossus split in two. Beyond the slowly dissolving Dark Priest stood the figure of the Holy War General, gripping a pair of swords.

"That makes two."

At those words, Riot was stunned. Already, around Regios, one Dark Priest had vanished into a dark, murky foam, and the Dark Priest who had been cut in two right before his eyes was being swallowed by the earth as he gasped for breath.

In that brief moment, he had instantly cut down two of them. It was a sword technique worthy of awe.

"Yel! Nae! Yel—" The remaining one kept its distance from Regios, frantically swinging its front legs - but it wasn't simply running amok. The traces of its comrades, now turned to foam, were gradually creeping up at its feet. As the living black foam was sucked into his body, the Dark Priest's form swelled to twice its original size.

Riot repositioned himself to create some distance. "I knew they wouldn't be an easy opponent..."

"To fight even in death? How admirable." Regios, holding his sword in a guard stance, praised the Dark Priest. But right before his eyes, the Dark Priest suddenly sank into the ground.

Without a sound, his form vanished into the earth. Reacting instinctively, Riot leaped far backward.

(Where is he coming from...?) The enemy had made his entire body disappear. All she had left to rely on was her sense of presence.

Regios narrowed his eyes, sharpening his senses to the utmost. "Riot, over there!" As soon as he spoke, black slime rose up behind the Battle Armor Demon.

Before Riot's eyes as he turned, living tar surged forward. Riot thrusted her Electromagnetic Greatsword right into the midst of the flow.

"Yel! Nae! Yel-"

"This guy... I didn’t expect this!" The liquefied Evil Spirit wrapped itself around the greatsword, rendering its blade useless. Then it immediately retreated, burrowing back into the earth.

"Regios!" Acting on instinct, Riot called out.

This time, slime erupted from behind the Holy War General. Regios quickly changed direction, attempting to swing his swords left and right - however, a small amount of the slime exploded in midair, obstructing Regios’s vision.

"It’s a decoy! Regios!" Realizing this, Riot tried to rush over - but before she could, a massive amount of slime was once again fired from behind Regios.

"Yel! Nae! Yel-"

"I know," Interrupting the roar, Regios nodded. "That’s why I lured him here." Turning around, he raised his left and right swords in a cross-shaped stance.

For an instant, the blades of the longswords caused the heat of the holy light to surge. The blades pierced the slime and met the Heretic Priest with searing heat.

"Yel! Nae! Yel!" The severed evil priest attempted to regenerate, but it was too late. A steam explosion erupted from the point where the blade had touched him, and he was mercilessly vaporized. The Demon God turned back into a mass of black foam and perished, scorched by the pale holy light.

"I guess I was the more cunning one after all." Regios sheathed his sword and smiled briefly at Riot. "Let’s hurry. This is a race against time." And once again, his eyes blazed with fighting spirit. "Before Justice falls into the enemy’s hands."

"Eh, yeah..." That’s a strange thing to say. Justice is already in the enemy’s hands, after all. Tilting her head, Riot stared at Regios’s profile.

But soon, the Battle Armor Demon would come to realize that Regios’s words were correct.

"This is my body... this is my new life..." Chris, now a Blood Pact Member, continued to laugh as he looked down at his own flesh. Then, suddenly shifting his gaze, he pointed a finger at Justice. "Come on, then — for real."

A bloodcurdling scream rang out right next to Justice’s ear. One of the snake women who had been holding the Holy Warrior down lunged toward Chris. She leapt through the air, bringing her sharp claws down from both sides - but Chris let out a smug, confident smile.

He pulled the snake woman in until she was mere inches away, then drew his double-handed sword from his back with lightning speed. The pitch-black blade sank into the snake woman’s shoulder and continued straight through to the center of her chest. A clean split. Having effortlessly sliced the snake woman in two, Chris let out a roar of laughter.

"Amazing! This is me! This is my new body! I thank you, my Lord! O Evil Spirit King Nmul-Tatura!" His thoughts, a jumble of childish and adult reasoning, caused him to scream.

The blazing Evil Spirit King Nmul-Tatura, too, radiated a sense of satisfaction. "From this moment on, you are my son, my power, and the embodiment of my will.

Shatter the world of the Creator God into dust and mix all hope within it. Let us welcome the Day of Calamity together, Chris of the Blood Pact."

Justice's Holy War Staff, lying at his side, repeatedly emitted a red warning light. Yet Justice merely gazed at the scene with a sorrowful expression.

Chris met the Holy Warrior's gaze with his own. "What's with that look...!" Stomping on the snake woman's entrails spilled at his feet, Chris roared. "Is that the look of utter contempt for the fallen?! Or is it pity for a tragic fate?! You've hit the nail on the head! This is exactly what I wanted! Thanks to capturing you, I got a great view! Thanks a lot!" J

"Chris..." Calling out to him, Justice let out a sigh. "I have to defeat you."

"How simplistic. The ethics of a Holy Warrior." Scoffing, Chris stepped toward Justice. "Until yesterday, you were worried about my body, but the moment I formed a Blood Pact, you're going to kill me?"

"That is my mission." Justice stated it decisively. "Whether it's a child or a blood relative, I cannot spare a Blood Pact member. We've had that rule drilled into us since we were young."

"How noble. But how are you going to defeat me?" Chris lightly tapped Justice's blood-stained cheek. "How, with a body that can't move? Are you waiting for big sis Riot to come?" The Blood Ally let out a soft chuckle. "You must really love her. But it's too late now. Riot already belongs to another man. Look..."

Chris sheathed his sword and turned his right palm upward. A translucent sphere reappeared in his hand and expanded rapidly - and this time, an image of Riot appeared within it. But...

"Ah...!" Justice let out a cry that was somewhere between shock and a scream.

She turned his face away and shut her eyes tightly.

Seeing this, Nmul Tatula sneered in a hushed voice. "Chris, it seems the sight is too much for a holy warrior who knows nothing of women. Send it directly into his brain."

"Will do," Chris replied, and with a delighted expression, he focused his will.

Just as Justice closed his eyes, the image before him was transmitted into his mind. In the darkness, the form of Riot emerged. But this figure was not that of the fierce Battle Armor Demon.

It was the form of a naked woman.

"An interesting spectacle, isn't it?" Only Chris's raucous laughter reached his ears. "Though, since you've been traveling together for two years, you've probably seen her like this before. Or is that just in your imagination?"

Soon, strong, bare arms wrapped around Riot's body. Regios, who had appeared, gently pulled Riot toward him. Riot, like a helpless maiden, surrendered her naked body to Regios. And they kissed each other greedily. Like beasts, they made love.

"What has sprouted within you, Holy Warrior Justice?" Nmul Tatula's thoughts shook Justice's body. "Jealousy? Lust? Or perhaps hatred? All of those are emotions a Holy Warrior should shun. But something must be sprouting within you. Look upon what has sprouted within yourself. Just be true to your own emotions. If you want to violate, then violate. If you want to take, then take. Cast aside such mistaken notions as 'sin'. After all, aren't humans inherently corrupt beings?"

Even as the voice continued, Regios and Riot's movements did not stop. If anything, their movements grew more intense, and their joyful breathing reached Justice's ears.

"You think it's an illusion, don't you? It might indeed be an illusion. But it might also be the future. And it might be desire - the one that has sprouted between the two of them, you know. They're already in love. In their hearts. There's no room for you in Riot's heart. Even if she comes to save you, she'll cast you aside afterward."

Chris twisted his lips and reached out to Justice. "Come with me. The Demon Emperor is waiting. No one is waiting for you in the world of the past. Come. Into the abyss of darkness where even light cannot reach..."

Justice opened his eyes. Before him, Riot was still in Regios's arms. Even so, the Holy War Officer fixed Chris with a resolute gaze.

"It's true — Riot might love Regios."

"Huh, so you admit it. That's refreshing."

"But if the two of them love each other and Riot can be happy, then I'll be happy too."

"Stop putting on a brave face. You like Riot too, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. But I can't make Riot happy." Justice turned his gaze toward Nmul Tatula as well. "Regios told me that a harsh fate awaits me. If that's true... I don't want to drag anyone else into it..." Then he turned his gaze back to Chris. "I have to go alone. Because I love her, I have no choice but to leave."

"You really are a hypocrite, Holy Warrior." Chris pointed his finger at the image of the two of them. "Look at this. Human love — in the end, it all comes down to this. I'm sure you feel the same way. Stop pretending."

"It's not a lie. I...."

"If it's not a lie, then why did you look away just now! Just say you didn't want to see it — that disgraceful spectacle!"

"Enough. There's a limit to what can be explained with words." Silencing Chris's voice, the Demon King projected his thoughts. "As long as there is hope, it may be impossible for us to welcome Justice. Chris, you know what to do..."

"I shall shatter that hope into a million pieces for you to see." He declared with a voice brimming with confidence.

"It appears the intruder is already approaching this Temple of Guidance. If we slay Riot right before his eyes, even the Holy War Officer will change his mind."

The illusions of Regios and Riot vanished, and the two figures on the battlefield appeared. Brandishing black blades, the two raced through the darkness.

"You are to slay Riot, Chris. I have granted you that much power. Fight to your heart's content."

Prostrating himself, Chris licked his parched lips.

"Our goal is the corruption of the Holy Warrior, Justice. Let us teach him that believing in a God of Creation will not save him. To that end, the best strategy is to make him lose his loved ones in the most brutal way."

"Chris!" Ignoring the scream, Nmul-Tatula began to spin, its flames growing fiercer.

"Bestow despair, and give birth of hatred. Justice's dreams ends here. We shall carve out a new era with our own hands" A voice like a bell shook the sanctuary.

And as if to challenge that thought, someone called out the Holy Officer's name.

"Justice!" Riot shouted at the towering structure before her. "Can’t you hear me, Justice!"

The stone walls, entwined with vibrantly colored vines, possessed a solemn grandeur reminiscent of a temple. Yet the bizarre carvings adorning the massive gates all depicted Evil Spirits. A long staircase led up to the tightly sealed gates, and from beyond them, an ominous breath rumbled.

"I can feel it." Regios spoke from behind him, and Riot turned around. The Holy War General fixed a sharp gaze on the top of the stairs and strained his senses beyond the gate. "Anyone can get this far. It’s getting through that gate that’s the problem."

Regios’s armor was drenched in the Evil Spirit’s bodily fluids from shoulder to toe. He had slain so many that both hands were not enough to count them, and his blade was chipped and battered.

Yet Regios stood firm, his breathing steady, not a single drop of sweat on his brow. "It’s the place where high-ranking Evil Spirits form Blood Pacts with humans. They call it the Temple of Guidance, but..."

"Justice is here, isn’t he?"

"Most likely. I can still sense his presence." Speaking as if he had just emerged from a pool of blood, Regios said, "Riot, go check it out on your own."

"Got it. But you..."

"I don’t think I’ll be able to pass through that gate." Without breaking his smile, Regios gazed at the Battle Armor Demon.

At those sudden, resigned words, Riot’s spine trembled. "Hey, what are you talking about? Weren't we supposed to go together..."

"It seems they’re not the kind of enemy who’d let us pass that easily." He sighed and looked up at the gate. "I didn’t want to meet you here of all places."

Riot felt a chill run down his spine at that smile.

Regios was the last person who would ever give up. Yet that smile held a sense of resignation — the kind only someone prepared to die could show.

"Regios..." As she called out, the Holy War General pointed toward the stairs with his chin.

Riot followed his gaze and caught sight of a torrent of darkness forming there. The darkness arose from nothingness, seeping into the space around it, warping and swelling as it grew. A groan like a ringing in the ears welled up from all around, and the earth began to foam and boil.

Riot realized she had unconsciously taken a few steps back. Her instincts, honed by years on the battlefield, were instinctively telling her to flee. Somewhere, an unpleasant, grinding sound echoed deep within his ears.

Unbelievably, it was the roots of Riot’s teeth chattering with fear.

Regios issued a brief warning. "Fall back."

Riot took a step back. As if to shield her, Regios stepped forward. Darkness surged straight toward the Holy General’s face. The distance was a dozen meters or so. But it seemed the concept of time and space held no meaning for it. In the blink of

an eye, it expanded, charged forward, and brought a jet-black blade crashing down upon Regios.

"...Haa..!" It was the first time I'd ever heard Regios scream.

Just as I thought that, a torrent of fresh blood spurted from the Holy War General's mouth into the air.

The impact and deafening roar sent both of us flying backward a moment later.

"Aaaahhh!" Riot was sent flying through the air like a withered leaf and slammed into the ground at breakneck speed. Her vision went completely white, and even the warning display vanished. Pain and terror unlike anything she had ever experienced. Her entire body trembled at the overwhelming disparity in power.

"Are you Riot?" Right beside her, someone asked.

Regios, having regained his senses, forced his eyelids open against his dazed consciousness. Regios stood motionless, embedded in the rocky mountain. Dark, thick blood flowed down from his mouth to his chest. The invincible Holy War General was drenched in his own blood, and not even the sound of his breathing could be heard.

"Re...gios..." She reached out to help.

But the Darkness showed no mercy, crushing Riot's hand underfoot. "Answer my question, Battle Armor Demon."

At the thunderous command, Riot looked up. The Darkness had, without her noticing, revealed its true form. Or rather, was that truly its true form?

The figure he looked up at was a tall man, over two meters in height. He held a gleaming black spear effortlessly in his hand, radiating an air of authority.

(That spear... The spear I saw at the Bazara inn...)

But while his voice revealed him to be a man, his appearance made it impossible to tell if he was even human. The one standing before Riot was a humanoid figure wrapped entirely in black bandages.

"That's certainly true..." Suppressing her fear, she finally managed to squeeze out a voice. "I am Riot, the Battle Armor Demon... Who... are you...?"

The opponent's face was completely wrapped in bandages, revealing not even a hint of expression. Only rough skin and red eyes peered out from the gaps in the cloth. Arms and legs were covered in bandages, with countless torn ends fluttering in the wind. The armor draped over them was also black, and the familiar emblem of the Heretical Sect was engraved in gold upon the chest.

It was the same emblem of the Heretical God Emperor recorded in Justice.

"I've come to claim that child." At those words, Riot's eyes widened. "Your journey is over. Give up and journey to the underworld. There is no longer a place for you by Justice's side."

It was a thought that brooked no argument. A dignity felt alongside awe. A steadfast conviction coexisting with evil.

Riot tried to call out the dark man's name.

"And you must be..."

"Move it, you black one." Suddenly, a quiet curse echoed through the mist. Boulders clattered and scattered around them. Shaking them off his body, the golden man rose to his feet with composure. "You shouldn’t be trampling on a woman's hand."

"Regios!" Riot was about to cheer for the Holy War General who had risen - but at the sight of his pitiful form, she involuntarily gasped.

Regios’s forehead was split open, and the flowing blood covered half his face. His handsome face was torn, and combined with his piercing gaze, it created a terrifying expression.

Even though he was a general in the service of the gods, his appearance was reminiscent of a demon.

"Holy War General Regios... Have you taken up your sword again? You foolish man." Stepping away from Riot, the Dark Blood Oath-sworn clenched his spear. "Only death awaits you. Will you still try it?"

"Everyone dies eventually. You too." Regios pulled a red cloth from his bosom and wrapped it around the wound on his forehead. Once the bleeding had stopped, he grinned and drew his twin swords. "Before I do."

Regios leaped. The Blood Oath-sworn charged forward as well. Gold and darkness collided in midair, their weapons clashing. A heavy, metallic clang. It echoed dozens of times in the blink of an eye.

Regios's shoulder guard was blown off, and the Blood Pact's bandages tore away. The pressure of the bladed summoned a gust of wind, and their fighting spirit spewed forth heat.

Riot watched the duel between good and evil in a daze. (I'm out of depth here...)

Regios couldn't stop the Blood Sworn from closing in. He retreated, parried the attack, and drove in a counter strike. That too was dodged, and the Blood Sworn pressed even closer. Though it looked like an even match, Riot realized Regios was at a disadvantage.

(What do I do...!) Her wavering gaze fell upon the electromagnetic greatsword lying a few meters away. In that instant, Riot finally remembered that she was a Battle Armor Demon.

"I have no choice but to go for it!" She shouted those words, as if to rouse herself. She sprang to her feet, grabbed hersword, and dashed off in a single bound.

But Riot wasn't heading toward the duel; she was heading for the stairs leading to the main gate.

The Blood Sworn noticed her movement, and Regios's smile returned.

"Foolish... to go alone..."

"Get down, Riot!" The Holy War General leapt backward and formed a return seal with the sword in his right hand. "Final Strike!"

"Regios, don't!"

Realizing his intent, Riot screamed as she turned around.The Blood Alliance member also positioned his spear in front of his body, shifting into a defensive stance.

But Regios's target was not the Blood Alliance member.

"Tenrin Type-3 Rock Barrage!" Along with the summoning cry, a white light illuminated the surroundings. A circle of light, likely ten meters in diameter, appeared before Regios. Adorned with ancient sacred script, the circle emitted flashes of light and caused the air to tremble.

Then, as the center swirled violently, a deafening roar and a shockwave erupted all at once.

"You!" The Blood Oath member roared, sensing Regios's intent. But it was too late.

What erupted from the circle was a swarm of countless boulders shrouded in white flames. They grazed past the Blood Oath member, passed over Riot's head, and slammed into the gate at breakneck speed.

An impact that shook the very world. The earth trembled, and white mist evaporated upon colliding with the heat. The Great Gate, struck directly by the barrage of miracles, was blown to smithereens, scattering its debris across the ground.

It took a moment for silence to return.

"It's open..." Riot stood dumbfounded by the miracle's power. Beyond the blown-away gate, only pitch blackness swirled. Justice must be in the midst of that vortex. But...

(Why, you...) She turned around and cursed Regios in her heart.

The Holy War General sank to his knees with a thud, yet his smile remained unbroken. He nodded and picked up the sword he had thrown aside. "You remember what I said earlier, don't you?" Regios asked, his face smeared with blood. "You go alone. I'm staying here."

"But you can't use miracles anymore, can you?!" This time, Riot shouted the words out loud. "What are you going to do?! Even if Justice is saved, if you die...!"

"Stop yelling. I'm still alive." Saying that, he raised the swords in his hands slightly. "As long as I have the will to fight, that's all that matters. That's enough."

"But... that's not fair...!"

"Tell Justice that too. Promise me." Regios tightened his lips and turned his back. "I'll definitely follow you later. I promise." His broad back appeared to be trembling.

Realizing it was because of tears, Riot hurriedly wiped them away. There was no way she could change Regios's resolve now.

(Then I have no choice but to answer his call...)

She nodded silently and ran up the stairs. She plunged into the approaching darkness without a second thought.

As Riot's footsteps faded into the distance, Regios smiled contentedly. "She's gone. It's just us now." He called out to the Blood Oath member who had vanished. "Let's give it our all, shall we?"

A black shadow materialized once more before Regios. The Blood Oath member, having shifted back into human form, stared intently at Regios from head-on. "You live up to your title, Regios... The Holy War General. A hero even greater than his reputation. A fool even greater than I'd heard."

Regios smiled, hiding the excruciating pain that coursed through his entire body. "You, the one feared as the Wolf King of Bergen. There must be a reason you turned to the dark powers."

"I have absolutely no idea who you're talking about."

"Are you playing dumb? The Twelve Popes wanted to know, too. And Justice, of course." The Holy War General closed the distance, step by step. "And I want to know too. Why did you fall? What did you fall for?"

"If you want to know, then try to take my life first. I won't let you pass through that gate. And I won't give that child back either." The Blood Oath Sworn raised his spear.

The Holy War General crossed his twin swords. Regios nodded to the former Holy War Officer. "Then let's begin. Until our lives are spent... Lord Eisen of the Blood Sworn."

The name echoed hollowly between them. The man of darkness merely exchanged glances with the Holy War General for a moment.

(How much longer will this go on...?) Riot pressed forward, relentlessly cutting through the darkness. There was no sensation of a floor beneath her feet — an uncertain space, as if she were walking on air. Even the passage of time was unclear; all the measurement functions displayed on her retinas had ceased. Yet finally, she spotted a light in the distant horizon.

(That is...) She tried to focus to confirm it, then stiffened.

With purple flames at its back, the body of a blue-green serpent writhed in the darkness. As she drew closer, it became clear that it was not a single entity. And when he approached close enough, the serpent slowly raised its upper body.

"Na, a, a, kuru, un... E, Na, E, Kuru, Un..." Sensual female forms spoke in an esoteric language. Their long black hair flew wildly, their poisonous skin glowing in the purple flames. The Demon God, with the face of a human and the body of a serpent, raised its long claws to threaten Riot.

But the Battle Armor Demon ignored such blatant hostility. Her senses had already detected the approach of a greater presence.

(Where is it coming from.....)

"I do wonder, indeed." A voice that seemed to see right through her mocked from the darkness. It sounded familiar, yet she still couldn't believe it. But in the same tone, the opponent repeated the provocation. "Try guessing where I'll attack from."

"You... are you really Chris?!" Riot shouted angrily at the voice echoing around her. "Where is Justice?! I'm taking that kid back!"

"That's out of the question. Besides, you're not up to the task. Know your place, you puppet."

In a fit of rage, I almost reached for the pistol at my waist - but Justice must be somewhere in this space. Shooting indiscriminately would be foolish.

"You held your ground well. You're surprisingly calm." Once again, the boy's voice read my thoughts. "You seem desperate to get him back. Well then, I suppose I'll at least let you see him."

Instantly, the purple flames multiplied to the left and right. One became three, three became five. The flames formed a large circle, encircling Riot. And as the circle expanded, the surroundings came into sharp focus.

"Where are you, Justice!" The Evil Spirits reacted to the shout. They silently slid their coiled lower bodies forward.

Then, from behind them, a boy appeared, his arms bound by the snake women.

"Justice!"

"Riot... why did you come..." A faint voice finally reached him. Holy War Officer Justice's armor was stained bright red with his blood. His cheek was slashed diagonally, and a deep, gouged wound was visible on his leg.

(Oh...) At the sight of him, Riot nearly dropped het sword in shock. When she realized Justice was dying, something trembled deep within her chest. Grief and fury rose from the back of his throat, threatening to turn into sobs.

As the seductive form of the snake-bodied, human-faced Evil Spirits moved, Justice, bound by both arms behind his back, appeared.

Yet, though her eyes burned with rage, Riot exhaled a deep sigh of relief.

(He's still alive...) That alone eased the suffocating weight she'd been carrying. She'd seen him again. She'd spoken to him while he was still alive. Riot forced a smile to hide his sobs.

"It can't be helped now that I'm here... Don't complain."

"I didn't want you to come..." Justice muttered, as if lamenting. "You can forget about me now... You don't have to... deal with me anymore..." And then he let out a groan of pain. "I don't want to be a burden to you any longer..." Justice's voice was so faint it seemed on the verge of fading away.

But as those words reached her ears, a fresh surge of anger coursed through Riot's veins. "D-don't say such dumb things." Riot fought desperately to keep her voice from trembling. "Don't even think about making me stay in Wilder Village all by myself."

"But it's better for you that way..."

"You've got to be kidding! You're annoying enough on your own — and you want me to take care of a whole bunch of kids?" Riot gave her partner a forced smile and nodded. "I'm not doing any cooking, laundry, or taking care of cows and horses. If I absolutely have to look after someone, I'll put up with you — and only you. Don't leave me in the middle of the countryside like that." Her powerful voice trembling, Riot let her feelings spill out.

(...I have no choice but to stay by your side, I...)

Justice, too, let tears spill from his light blue eyes, holding something back. Wiping away the mixture of blood and tears, he nodded firmly. "...Thanks for coming to save me..." That was all he could manage to say. After that, he could only clench his fists.

"...Get the hell out of here already." Riot shifted her gaze and glared at the snake women with resolve."You guys aren't Justice's type. Just disappear."

As if in defiance, the Evil Spirits extended their long tongues in a taunt. Ignoring the sickening feeling in her stomach, the Battle Armor Demon accepted the challenge."If you're going to tempt me, you'd better bring someone more innocent."

"N-A-Aaaaaaa! E-N-Eeeeeee!" The War Armor Demon's voice was cut off by the Evil Spirits' roars. They tossed Justice to the ground and leaped at Riot from both sides.

Riot raised her electromagnetic greatsword and faced the pincer attack.

"Gee, thanks for nothing!" Riot flashed a glare at the Evil Spirits on either side. "Another one of these freak hunts. I'm sick and tired of it!"

(Justice! You're the one who'll give me a battlefield! The best battlefield!) Riot had finally returned to where he belonged. There is no peace, no quiet, and no tranquility here. But on this battlefield, I can be a force for Justice.

This was the only place where I could feel glad to be in the body of a Battle Armor Demon.

"Na, a, aaaaaaaah! E, na, eeeeeee!"

"Haaaaa!" Riot swung her greatsword with ease, slicing through the Demon God on her right and mowing down the one on her left. With a single strike, both heads were

severed and flew off into the darkness. Even so, the headless Demon Gods began to thrash about, struggling to leap at her.

Riot drew a pistol from her waist and fired a barrage of finishing bullets. The Demons, struck by Zodanium rounds, writhed in agony before finally dissolving into foam and vanishing into the earth.

She turned to his partner. "Justice!" Riot tried to run toward Justice, who was lying on the ground.

The young Holy War Officer also crawled across the ground, reaching out his hand to Riot. "I'm sorry, Riot..." In his dazed state, he tried to drag his blood-soaked body forward.

But once again, the cruel boy's voice echoed through the area. "You're quite the fighter. Is it thanks to Regios's miracle? Or maybe it's because of the bond. They say you get stronger when you have someone to protect... I hate that cliche."

"Shut up!" Ignoring him, the Battle Armor Demon sprinted toward her partner. "He's my Justice! I won't let you have your way with him!"

"I told you it's impossible." The thought echoed once more. "Seems you won't be satisfied until I prove it to you with force."

The moment he spoke, Riot had closed in on Justice.

But between them, Chris appeared without a sound. Riot was taken aback by the sight of the boy in black armor.

"Are you really...!"

"I won't lie. You can't defeat me." Chris said in the voice of a middle-aged man.

Riot instantly shook off her surprise and swung her greatsword high above her head - but Chris swept his leg out, knocking Riot to the ground.

Holding the sword down with one hand, he used brute strength to force Riot to the ground.

"Riot!" Justice's screaming body was sealed within a pyramid-shaped black barrier.

Riot desperately reached out toward the magic cage, which emitted flashes of lightning. "Justice, I...!"

"There's a reason we kept you alive. We want to end Justice's journey. We want to end Justice's suffering. But he has too many attachments to fall into corruption. Lord Justice..." Chris loomed over the Battle Armor Demon, radiating the thoughts of both the adult and the boy. "But if you die, Justice will despair. If you suffer more than death, Justice will curse the Creator God. For that purpose, you shall serve as a sacrifice."

Riot resisted Chris with all his might - but even with the limiter on her artificial muscles disabled, she was no match for the Blood Sworn.

Justice, too, kept pounding the walls of the black pyramid. "Stop it, Chris! Get away from Riot!"

"So she really is that important to you. To get so desperate like that..."

"Riot has nothing to do with my fate! Don't drag her into this!"

"That's exactly why I'm dragging her in. That should be the most painful part. If you're going to curse anyone, curse the Creator God. He won't save you. Just like he couldn't save my body."

Riot looked up at Chris’s triumphant face with a piercing gaze. "If you’re going to kill me, just do it already." She declared this, her words dripping with unwavering conviction. "Justice isn’t the kind of guy who would despair over something like that. He’s experienced grief many times over — enough to withstand seeing me die right before his eyes. Don’t underestimate him."

"I see. Then let me show you." Chris responded to her defiance with a cruel smile. "It seems you, too, have yet to know what true despair is."

The Blood Pact member’s smile, as he licked his lips, was so terrifying it made one’s blood run cold.

The twin swords and the spear clashed once more. How many times had they locked horns by now?

From the indecisive duel, Regios retreated sharply.

"I can’t take this anymore." Wiping the blood and sweat dripping from his chin, he declared. "As expected of a Blood Oath Sworn directly under the Demon Emperor, you’re in a league of your own." His golden armor was already torn to shreds in places, and the wounds reached deep into his flesh. Regios’s complexion, which looked as if he had bled dry, had long since gone beyond pallid.

In contrast, there was not a trace of fatigue on the Blood Oath Sworn’s face. Not a single breath was out of rhythm.

"And you’re not even fighting at full strength, are you?" Regios asked the figure standing aloof on the battlefield. "Or do you intend to settle this once and for all right now?"

"If so, you’ll die right here. Are you giving up? It’ll be easier if you just end it."

"That sounds good," Regios laughed bitterly. "But let me ask one last thing. What happened to those two? What do you plan to do?" He continued to ask, gauging the distance between himself and the pitch-black Blood Sworn.

"I can still sense their presence. I think they’re alive, but..."

"Chris intends to drive Justice to despair by driving Riot to despair."

Regios narrowed his eyes at the Blood Pact member’s thoughts. "Speak plainly. You’re beating around the bush."

"The Battle Armor Demon is still a woman. You should understand that."

Hot blood surged through Regios’s limbs. Where had such a surge of blood been hiding? It surprised even him.

"I promised Riot. I said I’d definitely follow later."

"That’s a promise you can’t keep in this situation."

"No, I can’t accept that. I’m going." Regios crouched low, closing the distance between himself and the Blood Pact member. Chris’s fall began with my failure. I have no choice but to be the one to strike him down."

"If I say I won’t let you..."

"Say it all you want. I’m going anyway." Regios fixed the Blood Pact member with a defiant gaze. Then, as if to throw him off balance, he dashed to the right.

"A feint. It won’t work." The Blood Pact member swiftly swung his spear down from above. A black wind swirled from the descending spearhead. "That’s as far as you'll get." The gust of wind seemed to block Regios’ path... or so it appeared.

"You!" The Holy War General’s triumphant shout and the Blood Oath Member’s regret clashed. Having withdrawn from the magic, Regios hid himself in the black wind and suddenly retreated.

The Blood Oath Member, realizing this, gave chase, but the Holy War General sprinted down the stairs in the blink of an eye.

Regios left the Blood Oath member behind and plunged into the darkness. "Sorry about that. We’ll talk another time." Only his voice echoed through the Temple of Guidance. "I’ll be back soon. With your son."

At those words, the Blood Oath member stood frozen, still clutching his spear. In the lukewarm breeze, the black bandage fluttered like a battle flag. Beneath the black bandage, the Blood Alliance member exhaled quietly.

"In the end, Justice will come to us. That is fate... It can never be changed..." Even after he vanished, that thought continued to drift in the white mist.

"I hear Justice likes you." Looking down at Riot, Chris smiled. "I don’t get it. What’s so great about a mechanical woman like you? Maybe he's just got bad taste in women?" Chris looked down at Riot’s face.Still grinning, he snorted lightly.

"I admit, I don’t know the difference between a real woman and a fake one. But still, I’m better off than you, pretending to be a hot woman with a manufactured face and body."

Riot looked away, swallowing her humiliation.

But Chris roughly pulled her face toward him. "You had yourself made to look pretty, didn’t you? Better than your original face. If not, then show me your real face."

It was a voice so cold it sent a shiver down her spine. Countless insults she had once endured resurfaced in Riot’s mind, resonating within her.

But as if to brush them aside, Justice’s voice rang out. "It’s the heart. Riot... there’s nothing about you that's fake"

"Huh? What part of her is even human?"

Justice then declared it with conviction. "Loving and caring for others is what makes a human. Riot..." He started to speak, then swallowed a sob. "...has always been kind. To me, and to everyone else..."

Still pinned down, Riot listened intently to those words. The resurgent shouts faded into the darkness beyond. With her eyes closed, all that came to mind were the happy memories of her life with Justice.

(Because you were there, I...)

"Wh—!"

(...I was able to live as a human...) She looked back on her short life and silently savored the memory.

But suddenly, Chris grabbed her face. "No, that’s not right. This one’s just a doll that half-heartedly imitates a human. I know she’d be ugly if I stripped away her mechanical body. That’s why she’s wearing human skin. You don't need it. This face, this body..."

The moment he said it, a chill ran through Riot’s entire body.

Chris’s hand had boldly slipped beneath her blouse. Riot squirmed, but Chris wouldn’t let go.

Raising his voice so that Justice, who was clenching his fist, could hear, Chris said: "Why do you have this on you? I don’t get it. This is an organ for raising children. You don’t need it since you can’t bear children. It’s just for show, isn’t it? Or is it to seduce men? I wonder if you used this to seduce Justice too, heh heh heh..."

Riot’s thoughts vanished into a blank fog. It was indeed a body made for decoration. Perhaps even a face made for decoration. But her own heart, being toyed with...

"Chris! You!" Justice’s scream was filled with rage. It was a fury Riot had never heard before. "Get away from Riot! You’re the worst Blood Sworn I've met!"

"I’m going to violate this cyborg woman" Chris declared triumphantly. "Having the one you love taken away right before your eyes. That’s the quickest path to despair. For you, and for this puppet, too."

Riot met Chris’s gaze with defiance.

The Blood Pact member twisted his lips into a smirk. "This mechanical woman harbors delicate feelings toward her own body. It may be a mechanical body, but it’s still precious to her. I’m going to destroy that precious body of hers."

"Fuck off!" Riot sat up, trying to escape from the Blood Sworn - but Chris’s power still held her in place.

"Chris! I won’t forgive you! I....."

"Hate, huh? That’s fine. Hate me even more. Otherwise, you won’t be able to come to our world."

Chris gave Riot’s leather armor a firm tug. "I think I’ll take a closer look. There must be other ornaments under it, right?"

"Guh...!" Riot turned her face away. It was a body she had once hated, a body she had even wanted to discard. If it broke, it could be replaced. But it was her heart that was being trampled upon.

"Huh, looks like this is an ornament too." Chris said in a surprised tone as he rummaged through Riot’s inner pockets. "Carrying something like this... heh, are you trying to say you’re feminine or something?"

Riot looked up. Justice, too, stared intently at the Blood Pact member’s hand. Chris was holding was a single wilted white flower.

Memories suddenly flooded back, and the scene from just a few days ago felt like a distant memory.

(Hmm, how about wearing it in your hair? I think it’d look good on you.)

(I used to give flowers to my mom, back in the day...)

(Yeah, I’ll find you a prettier flower!)

(You know... I kind of wish we could just live here forever!)

"Give it back...!" Riot reached out, only to be struck down.

And the white flower, too, was mercilessly crushed in Chris’s hand.

"Don’t get so angry over a single flower. Stop pretending to be human already. You’re a cyborg." White petals fluttered down from the Blood Pact member’s hand.

In Riot’s eyes, the torn petals overlapped with her own image.

But it was Justice who first let his grief and fury show. "Is that all you’ve got?!"

Chris’s brow twitched slightly. "What do you mean?"

"Is all you can do is pluck flowers, Chris!" Justice shot a piercing glare from within the barrier. Even after shedding so much blood, the Holy Warrior’s fighting spirit showed no sign of waning. "Is all you good for is bullying the weak! Are you just a puppet of the Demon King!"

"Shut up! This woman...!"

"Riot doesn’t despair!" He declared it with conviction. Then he gave voice to the blood boiling within him. "And I’m not going to despair just because someone like you’s doing whatever you want! Riot is strong! I’m so much stronger than you!"

With those words, something that had been dormant within Riot awoke. Countless memories flashed through her mind. There were times she had tried to die. There were times she couldn’t bring herself to die - but it was all because her life held no hope. Yet now...

Right nearby, those precious light blue eyes were shining.

She recalled it all once more and mustered every ounce of her will.

"How long are you going to keep touching me, you brat?" Riot spat the contemptuous words at Chris."You’re ten years too early. Or was this the reason you wanted to get stronger?" She cast a look of exasperation at the Blood Pact member. "Just using brute force to take a woman? You’re no different from any lecherous old man out there."

"Shut up! This power is..."

"If you say you have power, then fight me!" As if to quell Chris’s rage, the Holy Warrior hurled the challenge at him. "If you don’t believe me, then try to kill me! Can you do it? Can you fight a Holy Warrior?"

"Justice, you—"

Chris drew the double-edged sword from his back. He gripped the jet-black, glistening blade with eyes that had lost all reason.

But as if to halt his frenzied charge, a heavy veil of thought descended upon the surroundings.

"Halt, Chris." The Demon King Nmul-Tatura warned him. "He’s here."

At those words, Chris turned around.

Suddenly, a tall man leaped out of the darkness. His golden armor had already lost its shape, and his white hair was stained with his own blood.

But Regios plunged from above toward the Blood Sworn, brandishing his longsword. "Chris...!"

"So you’ve come, Holy War General Regios!" The Blood Pact member who shouted also leapt into the air.

The two collided mid-air, their swords clashing, and the moment they landed, they locked blades once more. "I’ve been waiting for you, big bro Regios. I obtained this power so that I could kill you.I formed the Blood Pact just so I could cut you down! When I kill you, my Blood Oath will be fulfilled! You’re the one who killed my father and mother!"

Regios desperately parried the blade of vengeance and sent it flying. "Why didn’t you go after me from the start! What did you do to Riot!"It wasn’t a shout, but a voice

choked with rage. "I’m the one who’s at fault! If you’re going to blame anyone, blame only me!"

"Regios!" Justice shouted while Riot rolled towards him. She picked up the Holy War Staff that had been lying there toward her and picked up the Electromagnetic Greatsword.

Holding a weapon in each hand, she sprinted toward the black pyramid. Riot thrust the tip of her sword into the barrier, which was crackling with magical sparks. "Justice, get down!"The thick blade, shrouded in holy light, pierced through the barrier and sliced it open.

A flash of light blazed brightly, but in the next instant, the barrier had vanished without a trace. "Ri, Riot..." Riot wrapped both arms around Justice, who had reached out to him. Her slender body began to slip away, covered in flowing blood. The Battle Armor Demon panicked and firmly held her small body close.

"Hang in there, Justice! Come on!"

"Yeah... I’m sorry, Riot..." Justice managed a smile, his face covered in blood. "I worried you... really..."

"It’s nothing new, you idiot." She wanted to stay immersed in that joy forever, but Riot remembered she was on the battlefield. "You can use a Miracle one more time, right?"

She thrust the Holy War Staff forward and placed it firmly in her hand. "Use it for yourself. You need to heal your wounds."

"But Riot..."

"Leave the rest to us." Cutting off Justice’s protest, Riot stood up. Holding a greatsword in each hand, she called out with a confident smile. "Let’s go back to our world together!" She let out a shout and leaped high into the air. Riot cut in above the two men as they clashed swords.

Regios and Chris glanced up for a split second.

"Don’t come near me, Riot!"

"The cyborg’s here!"

Ignoring both the warning and the pain, she brought her greatsword down toward the top of Chris’s head. Anticipating his effortless evasion, she swung again, aiming for the back of his neck. The tip of the blade grazed Chris’s skin, sending a spray of red blood into the air.

"You think we're even now?! Think again! The price for mocking me is high!" Riot roared, stepping up to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Regios. "Now it’s my turn to take that power of yours that you hold so dear."

Chris’s throat made a gurgling sound.

Regios also took a step forward toward the Blood Oath. "I wanted to stop this before it came to this." He hurled those words of regret at his beloved child. "But I won’t give up. There’s still time."

Regios approached Chris with sorrowful eyes. "Kill me. But after that... renounce the Blood Pact."

"That’s a bad joke, Holy War General." Chris looked up at his foster father with eyes filled with madness. "A sin is not a mistake. I have no intention of giving this power back. Though, to be honest, I haven’t shown you my true magic yet..."

Just then, he sensed someone approaching from behind him.

Turning around, he saw Justice standing there, holding the Holy War Staff. "If you show me that power... I’ll fight you."

"A half-dead man talking big..."

"It’s over. Stop this, Chris." Ignoring his wounds, Justice pointed the Holy War Staff at the Blood Pact member.

"You can’t handle the power bestowed by the Demon King. Regios knows that too." Then he reached out his hand to Chris. "That’s why I’ve been telling you: abandon the Blood Pact. Don’t you get it yet?"

"It’s you lot who don’t get it. I’m already strong! Of course I can handle it! Behold the full might of Lord Nmul Tatula! First strike!" Chris screamed in a voice that sounded as if he were coughing up blood. "Budding Slash Arm Extension!" Spreading his arms wide, he glared down at his three enemies with a confident smile.

Then, with a muffled sound, the flesh on Chris’s elbows bulged. Magic surging from within him broke through his skin, forming new arms. The black arms, each sprouting three joints, clawed at the sky in search of prey.

"Behold, this new power! This is the power bestowed upon me by the Demon King...!" The black arms of magic grew longer and swelled in size before their very eyes.

Riot instinctively braced herself. But Justice bit his lip with a sorrowful gleam in his eyes. Regios also lowered his head, letting out only a faint sigh.

And then, suddenly...

"Aaaaaaaah!" The cackling ceased, and a scream burst from Chris’s mouth. As if suddenly losing its direction, the black arm snapped back toward Chris’s shoulder.

The magic pent up inside him blew his muscle fibers to pieces, spraying murky blood all around. In an instant, his new arm shattered from the root.

"This is ridiculous! This is just ridiculous!" Chris stared at the wounds on both sides of his body, his mind reeling. "Why, my Lord! My body is already...!"

"So you couldn’t endure it after all." The Demon King’s thoughts murmured with boredom. "It seems you were too frail to wield my power. It cannot be helped. I suppose I’ll go in search of new hatred."

Chris opened and closed his mouth repeatedly, then looked up at the void in disbelief. "That breaks our promise! You said you would grant me the power to slay Regios! Was that a lie? Did you deceive me?"

"I did not deceive you. I did, in fact, grant you power. I never said it would be power you could endure." The Demon King’s mocking laughter echoed, and the Blood Oath-sworn stood frozen in despair.

"No way..."

"But your devotion is not in vain. After all, you handed over the Holy War Officer, Justice, to me."

The atmosphere trembled. No, space itself was warping diagonally. A chill flooded the surroundings, and soon a heat wave brushed against everyone's cheeks.
"Riot, go!" Shouting, Regios looked up at the sky. "This isn't a place for you lot!" As his voice echoed, searing flames filled the sky above them.
The raging flames erupted from the darkness and attacked with a will of their own.
"Duck, quick!" Snatching Justice into a sideways embrace, Riot rolled to the ground. The flames formed a tornado and pursued the two of them, the impact splitting the earth in two. Still holding Justice, Riot was swallowed by the fissure.
"Ri-Riot!"
"I told you we're going home! Together!"
Desperately extending her right arm, he fired a super-hard wire. It was caught by Regios's right arm.
"Over here, hurry!"
"I won't let you do this!" Regios yanked the wire wrapped around his arm back with a single, powerful pull.
But Chris's bestial roar flew toward the Holy War General, whose movements had been sealed. "I have the power! It's right here! I'll prove it by defeating you! Regios! You killed my parents!" With his twisted arm, he swung the two-handed sword down from above.
Regios calmly met that charge. "You're a hopeless case, aren't you?"
"Regios!" Kicking off the edge of the fissure, Riot leaped onto the ground. Justice was in his arms. And before her, Chris's sword was being swung down at Regios.
"Regios!!" At the same moment Justice screamed, fresh blood spurted from Regios's shoulder. Despite gripping her sword in her left hand, Regios didn't flinch.
He simply took the full brunt of Chris's straight-on strike.
"W-why...!? Why... big bro..." Chris's whisper drowned out by the scorching heat, never reaching Justice.
The Holy War Officer leapt from Riot's arm and sprinted toward Chris's back. "Chris!"
"Whyyyyyyyy!"
The Holy War General collapsed lifelessly, a faint smile still on his lips. Screaming in anguish, Chris yanked the two-handed sword from Regios and swung it wildly. The massive blade flew toward Justice, poised to sever his neck.
"Justice, dodge!" Riot reached for the pistol at her waist - but Justice crouched down and swiftly picked up the sword Regios had thrown aside.
Chris's sword flew past Justice's head. Then, with all her might, Justice thrust the tip of the blade into Chris's arm.
"Gah... Ahh!" The two-handed sword tumbled from Chris's hand, and his small, frail body fell backwards.
Justice pulled the sword free and turned pale at the sight of the fresh blood caked on the blade. "Chris..." He called out to him and helped him sit up.
Tears welled up in his eyes and eventually fell silently. "Why... big brother..."
At that voice, Justice gasped. "Why, big brother... did you let me cut you down..."

In response to the question asked in his restored voice, Regios slowly sat up. "I had to do it... otherwise, you wouldn't have accepted it..." Stifling the blood gushing from his wound, the Holy War General approached Chris.

"You wanted me to cut you down, didn't you? Will you forgive me now? Heh, I really am hopeless, aren't I..." Chris smiled, his face drained of color. "I guess I'll never be able to beat you, big brother... I'm such an idiot..." And then he breathed his last in Justice's arms.

The young Holy War Officer clenched Chris's arm tightly and choked out, "You really are an idiot, Chris..." For a moment, he held the body and wept bitterly.

Riot lifted Regios's body, which lay on its side. "Regios, your wound..."

"It's not that deep. Shall I take my shirt off to show you?" Even as he joked, Riot showed no sign of a smile.

For now, he was simply there to witness Chris's death.

(Maybe I, too... Might have lived carrying a hatred like Chris's. I might have lived cursing my own body, cursing my fate. There was only one difference.)

"Justice, we don't have time to cry." To the one and only, to that unique existence, Riot called out.

Justice laid Chris's body down and made the holy seal with his fingers. Then, with resolve, he stood up. "I know. There are still enemies out there."

Regios turned his back to Riot and gripped his sword. The swirling vortex of flame rose into the sky, then descended back to the ground. It hovered above the three huddled figures, looking down upon Chris's remains.

"What a cruel world this is. That such a young life could be lost so easily. How long will this despair last, Holy Crusader Justice?"

"Don't talk as if this has nothing to do with you!" Justice hurled his fury at the Demon King. "Chris died because of you! The inn at Bazara too! And the people of Wilder Village!" His fist trembled. "You have no right to speak of the sanctity of life..."

"Then shall we fight? With that body of yours." The Demon King intensified the flames as if in mockery. "I'm afraid I can't call myself the Demon King if I'm defeated by a mere Holy Warrior. Regios lacks both the power to summon miracles and the strength to wield a sword. The Battle Armor Demon is out of the question. You lack the blessing of the Creator God, after all."

"Wh-...!" She tried to shout, but Riot could sense the overwhelming difference in power. It looked like nothing more than a mass of flames, but in reality, she couldn't stop trembling, her spine rattling with fear. If Regios and Justice hadn't been there, she would have panicked and fled in confusion. But as if to soothe that fear, Regios placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Justice can still use a miracle. Just once." Regios smiled as if challenging the Demon King. "That should be enough to defeat you. I'm sure you know that."

"A Healing Miracle" The Demon King, looking displeased, twisted his thoughts. "Are you going to use that to heal Regios? If so, the Holy War General will be able to wield his sword to the fullest. He might just be able to put up a fight against me. You've thought this through, haven't you, Justice?"

Only now did Riot realize her partner’s plan. That was why he hadn’t healed his own wounds. If he heals Regios instead of himself, he can defeat the Demon King. Seeing Justice’s back, which had read the situation so clearly, looked more heroic than ever.

"I can only call it a regret. But this time, giving up seems to be the best course of action." Nmuru Tatula sent out his thoughts with a touch of self-mockery. "Enjoy that world for a while. Though it will only be until the end begins." The darkness around them shifted to a bluish-black hue, and the Evil Spirit King’s voice began to fade.

Realizing what was happening, Justice tried to step forward. "Are you planning to run away! I won’t let you..."

"Justice." Regios called out, stopping him. "Even if I fought, the chances of me winning are about 50 percent. If he’s backing down, we should too."

"No way!"

"There will be plenty of chances to fight from now on. As long as you don’t give up." Shaking his head, he quietly calmed the hot-headed Justice.

But Justice collapsed to his knees right there.

"Hey, Justice..!"

"I’m so frustrated..." The boy said to Riot in a tearful voice. "So many people died because of me... At the very least, I have to take my revenge on the Demon King with my own hands... To the people who died... I have to..."

Regios nodded and released his grip. Riot embraced Justice from behind as she sobbed. "Don’t ever forget that sense of regret."

"Riot..."

"I won’t forget it either. I’ll carve it into my body. Forever." Saying that, she took Justice’s hand. "Even if your journey comes to an end."

Silently, Justice hugged Riot. He rubbed his blood-stained cheek against her armor.

But Riot paid no mind, pulling the boy’s body tightly against her chest.

【Epilogue】

A damp wind blew across the hilltop.

Regios said the south wind, heralding the arrival of the rainy season, was colder than usual.

"You’re still going, then?" With a face covered in wounds, the Holy War General urged the two of them once more.

Justice nodded, and Riot shrugged. "This is my penance. Whether it rains or if an Evil Spirit attacks, the journey must go on." Saying that, Riot looked down at the foot of the hill.

At the ruins of the destroyed village of Wilder, the villagers were already bustling about rebuilding. Riggs, Anna, and the children were running around, carrying lumber.

"I’m leaving without saying goodbye, but..."

"Yeah. I'll tell everyone for you. They'll just end up crying anyway." Regios brushed his bangs aside and gave a small smile. "I might cry too. Get going. I'm not the type to linger over goodbyes."

"Got it," Justice said with a smile, extending his hand. "Thanks for everything. See you later."

"Yeah, see you later." They clasped hands firmly. Then Justice looked straight up at the Holy War General's face.

"I saw it back then." He cut in abruptly. "In the Temple of Guidance, there were Chris and Nmul Tatula... and another man — a Blood Sworn of the Evil Spirit Emperor, I think."
"Oh yeah." Riot, too, recalled that scene.
Regios's smile didn't waver in the slightest.
"You must have fought him, Regios. That guy is my..."
"You don't actually think he's your father, do you?" With an air of exasperation, Regios broke into a broad grin. "Believing in him is your trial. Are you planning to give it up?"
"But what if... Huh?" Justice started to speak, then looked down.
Riot watched him with concern, but the boy regained his smile as if he'd come to a realization. "That was a silly question. I'm traveling to find out exactly that."
"I hope you find the answer, in the way you want."
They nodded to each other, then let go of each other's hands.
Then, Regios spoke the words he had been hesitating to say. "If you find yourself at a loss... it might be a good idea to turn to the Twelve Popes. It shouldn't come as a surprise. They are the ones who guide the Holy Church. They might be able to give you some answers."
But Justice could only manage a wistful smile. "I'm always under suspicion. If I can come up with an answer, I'll go see them."
"Don't put too much pressure on yourself. They might be waiting for you to come, too."
The boy seemed to sense some hidden meaning in Regios's words. But he merely nodded, gripped his Holy War Staff, and ran off. "Well then, this is goodbye, Regios! Riot, I'm heading out ahead of you!"
"Hey, Justice! You've got to wait a bit for your injuries to heal properly!"
Ignoring the Battle Armor Demon's voice, the boy began running over the hill.
Regios let out a sigh as he watched his back. "He seems to think he's being considerate. He's still just a kid, after all."
"He's one weird kid, that's for sure." Riot said, and they shared a laugh.
And amidst the silence, their gazes met.
"Really, with you..."
"Yeah, I know." Riot smiled, cutting off Regios's words. "I feel the same way, too. I feel like I could make it work with you. It's different from Justice... um, how should I put it..."
The Holy War General smiled back at Riot, who was scratching the nape of her neck. "But you're leaving, aren't you?"
"Yeah, sorry. Our journey isn't over yet." Strangely enough, she couldn't think of anything else right now. Besides, it felt as though the thing she'd been searching for all this time had come just a little closer. She couldn't stop now. If she gave up now, she'd only regret it.
(.....)
Riot timidly looked up into Regios's eyes. "Hey, um... as a farewell..."
"Yeah, since we're here anyway."
"Don't say it like that."

"Sorry."
After exchanging a few brief words, Regios pulled Riot close.
Riot, without resisting, threw herself into his arms. They embraced, their lips drawing close. Just as they held their breath, about to share their feelings...
"Sorry, I can’t do this after all." Riot pushed Regios’s body away.
"What’s wrong?"
"We’ll do it the next time we meet. For now, goodbye." Smiling, Riot slipped out of her beloved’s arms and walked away. "Well, I just can’t help wanting to stay with you."
"You sure are one troublesome woman."
"Consider it a debt, okay?" With her greatsword slung over her back, Riot set off after her partner. Then she turned around and waved to Regios. "That is, if we ever meet again."
She started running again and caught up to Justice. The boy turned around and greeted her with a surprised look. "Huh? You’re already here, Riot?"
"What? Got a problem with that?"
"I don’t have a problem, but... I went out of my way to be considerate..."
"Don’t talk like some meddlesome old hag - you're still a kid."
"I'm not a kid! Besides, Riot, think of me as..."
"Then no snacks for a while! And no sweets!"
"That's a whole different story!" Justice pleaded with a tearful voice, and Riot gave him a gentle tap on the head.
Sticking out his tongue happily, Justice twirled his sacred armor. "Thank you, Riot. For coming with me."
"What’s with that now? That’s not like you."
"I’m going to look for flowers again." Saying this unexpectedly, he ran ahead. "I’m going to find even prettier flowers! I promise!"
At that smile, Riot stopped for a moment. Recalling the scattered petals, she then stepped forward once more. "You idiot! It’s dangerous to run off like that! Hey, wait up!"
A small commotion erupted across the Eternal Plains. With cheerful voices, the two set off to continue their journey.
Regios stood silently, watching their backs recede into the distance. Riot caught up to Justice, and they disappeared side by side over the hill. Even so, Regios stood exposed to the cold wind for a while.
"He really is gone, huh." He wiped the smile from his face and spoke to the empty field. "He hasn't properly met his father, either."
Just then, a figure appeared silently beside him. A young man clad in the sacred armor permitted only to high-ranking Holy War Officers, his flowing golden hair billowing in the wind. Having materialized from nothing, he fixed Regios with a piercing gaze. "But doubt must have arisen in Justice’s heart. This is the beginning. That doubt will eventually grow in size and strength, until it grows just as strong as his conviction."

"It can’t be helped. That’s his trial to figure out." Regios uttered the words with a sigh. "Besides, we’ll meet him eventually. You two aren’t the type to be shaken just because it’s begun."

"I hope so too. With all my heart." The two men stood face to face, gazing into each other’s eyes. "Return to me, Regios." There was a resolute tone to the commanding voice. "Times have changed. Those with power should join the battle, as many as possible. Surely you understand that."

Regios looked away and turned his gaze once more toward the direction they had departed. "Child of Calamity, your path will be stained with blood and flesh, and all your friends will journey to the underworld." Saying this, Regios smiled at him. "It was Chapter Four of the Holy Scriptures, wasn’t it... Don’t you think those words were meant precisely for Justice? Hey, Ernst." Having asked this, Regios continued to let the wind of the Eternal Plains wash over him.

The Golden Pope, whose name had been called, remained silent, simply gazing at the profile of the Holy War General.

【Afterword by Takeo Ichikawa】

Hello there. I’m the author, Ichikawa.

I’ve finally managed to write up to Volume 4 of this series.

This is all thanks to you, the readers.

This time, I’m delivering the "Romance Arc" that I’ve wanted to write for a long time.

The season is, after all, the sentimental autumn (or so it should be).

I hope you enjoy Riot’s new encounter.

And, one more thing to thank you all for.

I was able to buy a new computer.

Looking back three years ago, the computer I bought with my debut prize money — a machine full of memories — has broken down.

It was the unsung hero that helped me type up the entire manuscript for "Dark Frontier Blues".

Actually, it had been acting up since I was writing Volume 3, but it somehow managed to see me through to the completion of this fourth volume.

Thank you. Rest in peace.

And now, I’m writing this afterword on my new laptop.

Yes, I used to have a desktop.

I bought it thinking a larger screen would be easier on the eyes, but there was one problem: "I could only work in the room where the computer was set up."

To be honest, I was getting tired of writing in my own room day in and day out.

In that regard, a portable laptop lets me change my environment freely.

Whether I write in a park, take it to a library, or bring it to a café — it’s all fine.

I can fully enjoy my "dream mobile life" (a term that’s been obsolete since October 2002).

In fact, whether I’m soaking in a hot spring in Tohoku or lounging on a beach in Okinawa, as long as I can write my manuscript and send it off, isn’t that all that matters?
That’s right, that’s right — I’ll work while traveling!
...It’s been a few months since I had that idea.
This new laptop still hasn’t left the city.
In fact, it hasn’t even left the house.
Years of habit have become second nature, and I’ve reached a point where I can’t work calmly unless I’m in my own room.
Even though I used to complain about being so bored with it...
These days, I’m vowing that next time, I’ll break free from this hermit-like work routine.
And as always, my thanks to the illustrator, Poporucha-san.
Regios — once again, he’s exactly as I imagined him (lol).
Seeing your illustrations every time is my greatest pleasure.
So please continue to watch over Justice and Riot in the next volume as well.
And probably over Regios and that man, too...

October 2002, Takeo Ichikawa

《Song Title / Band Name / Album Title / Year of Release》

DEATH ALLEY DRIVER RAINBOW (STRAIGHT BETWEEN THE EYES) 1982
GATES OF THE BABYLON RAINBOW (LONG LIVE ROCK'N'ROLL) 1978
THE MICHAEL SHENKER GROUP (THE MICHAEL ARMED AND READY SHENKER GROUP) 1980
FRACTURE KING CRIMSON (STARLESS AND BIBLE BLACK) 1974
DEFENDERS OF THE FAITH JUDAS PRIEST (DEFENDERS OF THE FAITH) 1984
THRAKATTAK KING CRIMSON (THRAKATTAK) 1996
THIRD STONE FROM THE SUN JIMI HENDRIX (ARE YOU EXPERIENCED) 1967
USE MY THIRD ARM PANTERA (FAR BEYOND DRIVEN) 1994

Translator's note:

Good day! NineSoulsSea here, hope you enjoyed this translation of **Takeo Ichikawa**'s light novel, **Dark Frontier Blues 4**! This translation came at a time when I was locked out of Internet Archive, just like the previous book, so, my apologies to anyone who had to wait to see the continuation of Riot and Justice's story! As usual, a special thank you goes out to aNobody101 for telling me the method of obtaining BookWalker raws which I used when translating this light novel and will, hopefully, continue to use! This one is probably my favorite work by Ichikawa, second only to **TATTOO BLADE** - if only the next volumes mentioned in the afterword were written! So many questions left unanswered… Oh well! Next up is Ichkawa's final series, **Exert the Momentary**! Get excited!

And that's about it! Thank you for reading and have a blessed day!